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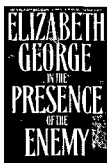




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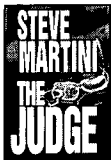
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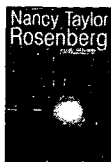
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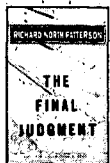
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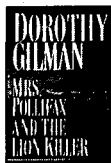
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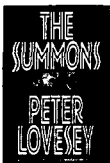
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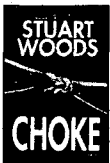
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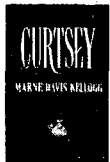
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

FATHER GIOVANNI by Raymond McGlynn	5
THE HANGING JUDGE by Brenda Melton Burnham	22
MONEY IN THE BANK by Thomasina Weber	36
THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY by David Edgerley Gates	51
SKIN DEEP by Jas. R. Petrin	82
BLUE DEVILS by James Sallis	111
FLORIDA JUICE by Stephen W. Herring	117
MISSING SINCE MONDAY by Ann F. Woodward	129

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE THIMBLE RIVER MURDER by Josephine Bell	142
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DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES	4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH	81
SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED"	109
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling	110
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon	154
THE STORY THAT WON	156

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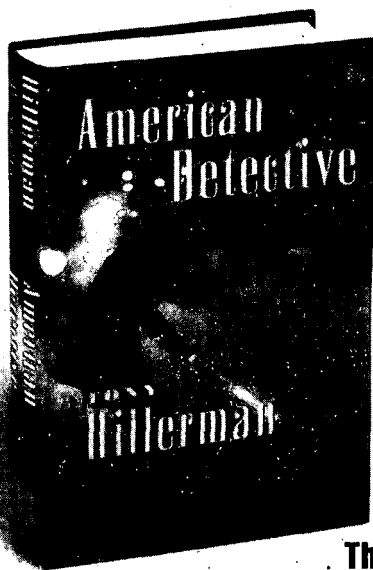
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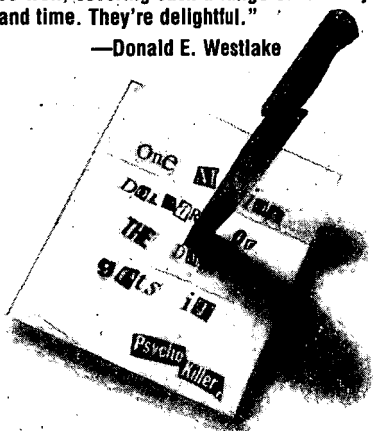
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

All of us here at AHMM are very pleased that this year's winner of the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for Best First Mystery Short Story is James Sarafin's "The Word for Breaking August Sky," published in our July 1995 issue. As you may remember, that story also won the first prize in the Alison Lurie Ghost Story contest last summer.

It's a terrific story, as everyone who has read it is eager to say, and we're delighted that the Edgar committee agreed.

This makes the eighth Fish Award out of twelve that has gone to a story published in AHMM. It is always a matter of great satisfaction when we "discover" a new and talented writer, and it's nice to have some, at least, of those authors brought to the special attention of the mystery-writing and mystery-

reading community at large.

The Fish Award was presented to Mr. Sarafin at the Edgar Banquet, held in New York on April 25th by the Mystery Writers of America, who named Dick Francis as this year's Grand Master.

Following are the nominees and winners in all the other award categories, with the winners in boldface type.

BEST NOVEL OF 1995:

***Come to Grief* by Dick Francis (Putnam)**

The Bookman's Wake by John Dunning (Scribner)

The Shadow Man by John Katzenbach (Ballantine)

The Summons by Peter Lovesey (Mysterious)

The Roaring Boy by Edward Marston (St. Martin's)

(continued on page 157)

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FICTION

Father Giovanni

Raymond McGlynn



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

One fine July morning more than a century ago Father Giovanni, the aging parish priest, who was ill with cancer, and Don Anselmo Ardeni, patriarch of the wealthiest clan in Cabrigaglia, sat on the flagstone terrace of Don Anselmo's farmhouse, in the arbor where fingers of sunlight tickled vineleaf shadows. They were drinking marsala. Don Anselmo served none but Sicilian wines. Vintages from the mainland, he swore, were adulterated with urine, the blood of oxen, or worse.

They toasted one another's health, incongruously. Don Anselmo looked as robust as the priest did moribund.

Father Giovanni asked Don Anselmo if he knew the story of the Spartan boy and the fox. The furrows on the patriarch's forehead deepened. "Sparta?" he asked. "In Greece? I know nothing of Greek boys. I prefer women."

The priest's emaciated features broke into a smile. "As I well know, being your confessor. The Spartans, however, chiefly preferred war. Their youth trained as soldiers from a tender age, subject to harsh discipline."

"A good way to discourage vicious tendencies," Don Anselmo commented.

"One day," the priest went on, "a Spartan boy fell into forma-

tion with a pet fox concealed inside his cloak. The fox was hungry. It chewed the boy's stomach, but the lad never flinched. He stood rigidly at attention while the fox ate his entrails."

"That's carrying military discipline too far. Where did you hear that story, father? It sounds to me like a crock of crap."

"It's a legend—maybe concocted to convey a point."

"And what's your point in telling it?"

Father Giovanni took another sip of marsala. His gaunt face was flushed from the wine and the heat of the day. "I have a fox inside me," he said. "He gnaws my bowels daily, never satiated, always hungrier."

"Can't the doctors help you?"

"Their potions only make me sicker."

Don Anselmo shook his head. Taking more wine, he worked it around his mouth, ballooning first one cheek, then the other, before swallowing. "I wish there were something I could do for you, my friend."

"There is," said Father Giovanni. "You can do me a great mercy. End my suffering. You'll do the parishioners a favor, too. Santa Maria Magdalena needs a new priest. I'm too sick to serve you adequately. I asked the bishop to replace me, and he claimed there was no one avail-

able. But if I'm no longer here . . ."

Don Anselmo leaned toward his friend and spoke in a harsh whisper. "Are you asking me to kill you?"

"Not you yourself, necessarily. I suggest you send Paolo, or someone else you trust, late at night. I'll hear his confession and give him absolution before he shoots me. One bullet in a vital place is all I ask."

With a grave look Don Anselmo asked, "Do you still have the pistol I gave you to frighten church robbers?"

"Of course. But . . . I can't bring myself to swallow the pistol."

"I understand why you can't. And you must understand why I can neither shoot you myself nor command it done. To kill a priest would be a sacrilege."

Thus rebuked, Father Giovanni fell to silent brooding. He knew from the confessional that Don Anselmo had ordered the death of a certain Frescobaldi, a produce wholesaler in Palermo who had swindled him. Paolo, one of the patriarch's numerous nephews, who at that very moment was picking olives about fifty meters from the arbor where they sat, had gone to Palermo, killed Frescobaldi, and gotten clean away. Father Giovanni had ordered both Don Anselmo and Paolo to assist the

victim's widow with anonymous donations as part of their penance.

Rather sulkily the priest asked, "If you can dispose of an enemy, can't you do the same out of mercy for a suffering friend?"

Don Anselmo, who had always enjoyed debating with the priest on less mortal topics, retorted, "There's an enormous difference between the two things. To eliminate a fool who persists in stealing from you is a natural and necessary action." He gestured at the bountiful orchards surrounding them. "My family has worked hard for this, and nobody's going to rob us of the fruit of our labor. I'll do what I have to to protect myself and my family. Self-preservation, father, is nature's first law."

"You sound like an evolutionary theorist," the priest said reprovingly. A bite from the fox's fangs made him wince. "That's heresy. Christ taught us a higher law—love and self-sacrifice."

"Somebody should have told that to Frescobaldi."

Donna Veronica, Don Anselmo's wife, could be heard lecturing a servant inside the house. Faint cries drifted up from the village. Humming a popular song, Paolo carried a basket of olives from the orchard to the press behind the arbor.

Father Giovanni thought it

wise to change the subject. "How is Lucrezia? I haven't seen the girl since her return from the school in Palermo."

All at once Don Anselmo looked as though someone had slipped vinegar into his marsala. "I sent her to stay with her aunt."

"Which aunt?"

"Serafina."

"In that old mausoleum on the road to the salt mines? Lucrezia won't find much amusement there."

"Why do you think I sent her? She needs less amusement. She's too free and easy with men."

Don Anselmo scowled, drank more wine, and said, "I wish you'd counsel Lucrezia, father. She hasn't been to church since coming home. Go out there and hear her confession, why don't you? I'll lend you a mule for the trip."

The priest was embarrassed. Don Anselmo's daughter had last confessed to him on Holy Saturday. Her perfume—a rare luxury among the women of Cabrigaglia—had insinuated itself into the priest's compartment in the confessional. As he leaned toward the grille, Lucrezia's breath, faintly scented with cloves, had tickled his ear while her soft contralto voice confessed to acts of impurity with a young man in Palermo. Father

Giovanni's aging, cancer-infested body, quite against his will, had grown aroused.

"I prefer not to go unless she asks for me," he said.

"Very well." Don Anselmo sighed and got up. "I must work on my account books." The priest stood, and they embraced. "Courage," Don Anselmo said.

The prosperous hillside farm and the village of Cabrigaglia stood on an arable strip of land between rocky inland hills and cliffs along the seacoast. As the priest descended the road, his view of the Mediterranean was gradually blocked by stone houses. His emaciated body sweated under the coarse fabric of his dark suit. The few parishioners who were stirring in the heat greeted the priest with anxious inquiries about his health as he walked to the church of Santa Maria Magdalena.

Santa Maria Magdalena was a poor parish, but the church did contain precious things: silver candlesticks donated by Don Anselmo, a golden monstrance presented to the parish by the bishop, and an anonymous oil painting of the Madonna and Christ Child, which an itinerant art thief had thought sufficiently valuable to justify cutting from its frame. Father Giovanni had surprised the in-

truder in the act. Shouting in outrage and brandishing a long-handled collection basket, the priest had charged the would-be thief, who had pocketed the knife, fled the church, and disappeared along the road to Palermo. After that incident, Don Anselmo had given Father Giovanni a revolver and plenty of ammunition.

Father Giovanni unlocked the church doors and opened them wide. After genuflecting before the altar, he moved to a side aisle and knelt facing the painting of Madonna and Child. The vertical cut on one side of the canvas had been glazed over and was scarcely noticeable. "Madonna," the priest said, "I rescued you from rape."

The anonymous painter had depicted Mary as a peasant girl suckling her infant, and the beautiful simplicity of the work always touched Father Giovanni. Today he asked the Madonna's intercession on behalf of Don Anselmo, Lucrezia, and other parishioners; then he prayed for himself. "Holy Mother, let your son not condemn me if I choose to end my suffering. He endured agony for one day. Mine has lasted more than a year."

His prayer completed, the priest locked the church and went to his nearby cottage to eat a frugal lunch of bread and

cheese. After lunch he took the revolver from a cupboard and checked to see that the cylinder was full. He slipped the gun into his waistband and a sack of cartridges into a pocket of his jacket. Leaving his cottage, he set off along a path leading out of the village.

The way wound through a wild area of boulders, rocky hills, and sparse vegetation seared by the sun, which cast the priest's skinny shadow ahead of him. Coming to a hollow enclosed at one side by a wall of shale, Father Giovanni stopped and took the revolver from his waistband.

Fissures and striations divided the wall into segments that served as excellent targets. Spreading his feet and taking careful aim, Father Giovanni methodically emptied the chamber, exclaiming with satisfaction when splinters of shale flew from a point at which he aimed. The pistol's sharp reports reverberated among the hills.

His body might be dying, but his hands remained steady, his aim accurate. If he encountered another thief, he should be able to frighten the man or inflict a minor wound to disable him.

As he reloaded the revolver, he heard a crow cawing. Then he realized that it was a human voice, a raucous cry echoing among the rocks and growing louder.

"Fool! Where are you? You've terrified my goats!"

Father Giovanni climbed out of the hollow and back onto the path. A lanky figure emerged from a row of rocks and came striding toward him. It was Niccolo, the herdsman. "Ah, father, it's you!" the man called, slowing his pace. The priest walked to meet him. Niccolo clasped his large, scarred hands and said, "Excuse me, father, but you've frightened my goats."

"I didn't think. Sorry."

"The gunshots bounce from rock to rock, bam-bam-bam-bam-bam!"

Niccolo pantomimed ricochet-ing echoes. Bloodshot eyes glared from his bearded face. His tunic, ragged and stained, flapped in a breeze off the sea. The priest was glad to be upwind of him. "It drives the goats crazy. Gisela has run off God knows where."

"I'll help you round them up."

"It's rough going, father. But come anyhow. After we find Gisela, I need your help to rid me of a devil."

"What devil?" the priest asked, surprised.

"A succulent," the goatherd hissed, climbing over a pile of stones and ascending a gravelly path flanking a cliff. Father Giovanni followed cautiously, groping for handholds.

When they were on a flat

stretch and the priest had caught his breath, he asked, "What do you mean, a succulent?"

"A succulent devil," Niccolo said, scanning the rocks for Gisela. "A devil that takes the form of a woman and lies with you."

Holy Mother, pray for us! Father Giovanni thought. He did not bother telling Niccolo that the word was "succubus." Succulent would serve.

An unmistakable smell accompanied by bleating led them through the boulders to a clear space where the herd had regrouped and was foraging for weeds. Seeing the priest, the lead ram lowered its head and charged. With a shout, Niccolo leapt at the beast, gripped its horns, and wrestled it to the ground.

"Your devil has gone into that ram," Father Giovanni said. He wondered what would have happened without Niccolo's intervention. He would not have had time to draw the pistol and take aim. The ram might have put him out of his misery. Probably it would have been the first time a goat killed a fox.

Niccolo sprang up, screaming at the ram, which skulked away, casting baleful glances back at the priest. Then, bleating plaintively, Niccolo's prize nanny goat, Gisela, appeared at

the edge of the clearing. Niccolo counted heads and found all his charges present.

"I hope the scare won't sour her milk," Niccolo said, caressing Gisela's neck.

The sun was low over the sea, casting long shadows across the hills, when Niccolo got his animals into their pen and, with the priest's help, rolled rocks into place to close the entrance. Father Giovanni was weary and in pain, but he stayed to listen to Niccolo's problem.

"At night, father, as I lie in my hut—" the stone hovel stood near the goatpen—"the succulent comes to tempt me."

"A devil in the shape of a woman. But, Niccolo, a crucifix will keep a devil away. Don't you have one in your hut?"

"No. I had a cross of palm leaves that I brought from church Palm Sunday, but one of the goats snuck into my hut and ate it."

"Perhaps the goat wished to take communion." The priest reached into a pocket and removed a leather pouch with the Virgin's picture on the flap. "Take this rosary and use it. Carry it with you by day, Niccolo, and pray to the Virgin. At night, before you go to bed, hang the rosary up with the crucifix in plain view."

"But, father, your rosary! I can't..."

The priest slapped the pouch into Niccolo's calloused palm. "I have others. Keep it."

The herdsman genuflected and crossed himself with the hand holding the rosary. Rising, he said, "Thank you, father. While you're here, could you bless my hut and say prayers to keep the devil away?"

"Of course."

"And please, go to the girl whose form the devil takes, and ask her if she knows that the evil one borrows her body."

"What girl? Someone you know?"

"I saw her in church at Easter. A beautiful young woman who they told me is Don Anselmo's daughter."

Father Giovanni gaped at the herdsman. "Lucrezia?"

"That's the one. Please, father, speak to her. Is it possible she would willingly lend her body to the devil to tempt me? Do such things happen?"

"Of course, Niccolo! A girl like Lucrezia Ardenti dreams of nothing more delightful than sneaking out at night to lie with some stinking goatherd! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

Niccolo pounded his forehead with the fist holding the rosary. "You shouldn't speak to me that way, father! Even a humble laborer is a child of God."

"I beg your pardon. But are

you quite sure it's not Gisela who lies with you?"

"Don't mock me. I recognize the girl Lucrezia perfectly, though I never before saw her unclothed. She comes to me naked."

A flash of illumination, like the sunlight that glinted on a cliff above them, revealed to Father Giovanni a way in which he might end his suffering.

"Excuse my jests, Niccolo," he said. "I see that the devil has tried you sorely. Fetch water. I'll bless it, then sprinkle your hut and say prayers to keep the devil away. And tomorrow, or as soon as I can, I'll speak to Lucrezia."

When Father Giovanni finished blessing the hut, Niccolo gave him a hunk of goat cheese, and the priest trudged homeward, exhausted. He didn't care for the smell of the cheese and gave it to old Pio, a crippled fisherman who subsisted in a hovel on the edge of the village. Back at his cottage, Father Giovanni cleaned the barrel of the revolver, prayed for a long time, and fell into bed. He and the fox slept fitfully.

Following Mass the next morning, he chatted with the handful of regular weekday communicants and gave each of them his blessing, perhaps for the last time, he thought. Then, after eating a light breakfast, he

set out across the village with the loaded revolver concealed inside his jacket.

As he approached Don Anselmo's farm, a wagon drawn by two mules and loaded with vats of olive oil and baskets of figs passed him, bound for Palermo. The driver and the armed guard, both nephews of Don Anselmo, waved to the priest. Paolo didn't accompany shipments to the produce dealers lest someone recognize him from his trip to assassinate Frescobaldi.

Don Anselmo seemed pleased when Father Giovanni announced that he had decided it was his pastoral duty to visit Lucrezia, with or without her invitation. "I hope you can penetrate the armor of my daughter's conceit," he said. "Speak sternly if you see fit. Put the fear of God into the girl. Paolo! Fetch Rosa!"

Rosa was a gentle mule who carried Father Giovanni along the Trapani road, pausing now and then to browse on vegetation or stare out to sea at a paddle-wheeler huffing toward Palermo. Several miles along, Father Giovanni turned the mule onto a branch road leading inland through country that looked bleached. White rocks and salty soil were dotted with a few cacti. This was the way to the residence of Don Anselmo's eldest sister, Serafina Carvag-

gio. After the accidental death of her husband, who had been a foreman at the salt mines, Serafina had stubbornly refused to vacate their rambling stone house, though all of her children had moved away. Most of the time she was alone, communing with her cactus plants and a pack of dogs with whom she shared the provisions sent weekly by Don Anselmo.

As Rosa approached the gloomy old house, Serafina's mongrels began to yap and bay. The rawboned old woman came stamping out of the house and silenced them. Having no longer any memory for names, she addressed Father Giovanni simply as "priest" while tethering Rosa and inviting him in for tea and cakes.

"Father Giovanni!" Lucrezia seemed genuinely pleased to see him. She must be bored and lonely here, he thought as she led him to a chair in the parlor. His arm tingled where her fingers touched him through the cloth of his jacket. She wore the same scent he had breathed in the confessional on Holy Saturday.

"You're not looking well, father," Lucrezia said, standing with hands on hips as she appraised him. Her black skirt and white blouse clung to her; perspiration slicked her olive skin. "I heard you were ill. You've

grown so thin." The concern in her voice fell on the priest's ears like consoling music. "You must eat some of these cakes that Mama sent us."

The three of them sat quietly nibbling cakes and sipping tea until Lucrezia spoke again.

"I can guess why you've come. Papa wants you to lead me back into the path of righteousness."

"Someone should lead you to the barn and tan your hide," said Serafina, and cackled at her own wit.

"Don Anselmo thought you might wish to confess," said the priest.

Lucrezia looked solemn. "I think not. I've begun to question the need for the sacraments."

The words wounded Father Giovanni, who had placed the first communion wafer on Lucrezia's tiny tongue when she was five. He wondered guiltily if the young woman had sensed his lust in the confessional. "I'm sorry to hear that. I hope that I've done nothing to contribute to your doubt."

Lucrezia's brown eyes grew wide. "Not at all. You're the nicest priest I know. Why would you think that?"

Feeling greatly relieved, the priest asked, "What is it, then, that keeps you away from the sacraments?"

Before Lucrezia could reply, Serafina set down her teacup

and stood up. "I'll go feed the dogs. You two discuss religion to your hearts' content."

"You must stay with us, Serafina," Father Giovanni protested.

The old woman squinted down at him. "You don't give orders in my house."

"It's not fitting to leave Lucrezia and me alone together. Your brother wouldn't approve."

Serafina bared her teeth and started to vibrate. Soon she was cackling so hard that she had to sit down and catch her breath. Lucrezia caught the giggles from her.

As a man, Father Giovanni felt insulted. When their hilarity had subsided, he said, "I may be old and unwell, but I'm still virile. Stay with us, Serafina, or I'll take the rest of these cakes and feed them to the mule."

Turning to Lucrezia, whose eyes glistened with tears of mirth, the priest said, "I'll pray that God will help you banish your doubts about the efficacy of the sacraments. Pray to the Blessed Virgin for guidance."

The girl bowed her head.

"I have a complaint from one of the men in the parish that you've been visiting him at night."

Lucrezia looked up with wide eyes and cried, "Complaint?" Both she and her aunt broke up completely.

Waiting for them to recover,

Father Giovanni sipped more tea. "The man is pious," he explained when they had grown quieter. "He tries to be chaste." Lucrezia was struggling to keep a straight face. "Maybe he is maligning you. He could have mistaken someone else for you. He says you have a wart inside your right thigh."

Lucrezia slapped the arm of her chair. "He's a liar! I have no warts!"

"Ah," said Father Giovanni. "Obviously we have a case of mistaken identity."

"Of course. How could I visit a man in the village when Papa has exiled me to the salt mines?" Lucrezia poured herself more tea. "I'm practically under house arrest."

"Do you have a birthmark?" the priest asked.

"Sure. Doesn't everybody?"

"Where? I hate to be indelicate, but could you describe it for me?"

Lucrezia shrugged. "It's not a military secret. I have a small brown birthmark shaped like a crescent, just here." She poked her skirt with an index finger.

"Just below your navel?"

"Yes, father."

"But no warts or moles?"

The girl pouted. "A tiny mole on the inside of my right breast. Shall I show you?" Winking at her aunt, she began to unbutton her blouse.

Father Giovanni watched in fascination, reminded of the painting that hung in the church. Surely Lucrezia would stop before . . . By the time she was loosening the fourth button he could see the mole.

"Enough! Thank you."

Lucrezia stared at him levelly as she did up her blouse. For the moment, Father Giovanni realized, age and priesthood were of no consequence. If Serafina hadn't been there, anything might have happened. In a way the thought consoled him.

After reminding Lucrezia to pray for guidance and thanking Serafina for her hospitality, the priest headed back toward Cabrigaglia. On the coastal road he found it necessary to dismount and go into some bushes. Relieving himself was an ordeal.

"Little fox," he said when he had finished, "I know you're sick of being trapped in this old carcass, trying to gnaw your way out. Patience. It won't be much longer." He buttoned up his trousers, tightened the belt in which he had punched extra holes, and slipped the pistol inside the belt again before remounting Rosa.

Waves of heat shimmered from the earth as the mule climbed the road to Don Anselmo's farm. Laborers were resting in the shade of the orchards, and the house was quiet. After

dismounting, Father Giovanni thanked the mule and went to sit in the shade of the arbor. A breeze from the ocean refreshed him. He had begun to doze when a shout startled him. He looked around to see Paolo chasing Rosa away from the fig trees.

Don Anselmo emerged from the house about an hour later, called instructions to the workers, carried a flask of marsala and two glasses into the arbor, and sat near the priest. He poured, and they toasted one another's health.

"So, father, did you see my daughter?"

Father Giovanni gave a theatrical sigh. "Indeed, I saw more of her than I had expected to."

The patriarch frowned. "Was she dressed immodestly?"

The priest shrugged and avoided Don Anselmo's gaze.

"Did she confess to you, father?"

"She did not. But I have a confession to make to you."

Don Anselmo's eyes, under mats of grey hair, glared at the priest. "That's a reversal of roles, my friend."

"Lucrezia was alone . . . she's so beautiful! I'm still a man, you understand."

"What the hell are you telling me?"

"We . . . enjoyed one another. I'm ashamed."

The patriarch slapped the

table and bellowed, "Do you expect me to swallow that story?"

Donna Veronica opened the kitchen shutters and poked her head out. Questioning voices were raised in the orchards.

"I'm wise to you," Don Anselmo said. "You want me to lose my head and kill you, as you asked me to do yesterday, to end your suffering. Am I right?"

"You don't believe I had Lucrezia?" The priest decided to play his trump. "Tell me, have you seen your daughter naked?"

Blood engorged Don Anselmo's face. "Never!"

"Not even when she was a little girl?"

"What kind of pervert do you take me for?"

"With these hands I removed her clothes."

"No more, father! This obscene foolery has gone too far!"

"I wish it were mere foolery. My baser instincts overcame me. I seduced your daughter."

Don Anselmo was on his feet. "If I thought that were true, I wouldn't shoot you. That would be too humane. I'd have you gelded, like a pig."

His plan might work, the priest thought. If Don Anselmo ordered someone to castrate him, he'd draw the pistol and send a couple of bullets buzzing past their ears. They would probably feel compelled to kill him in self-defense.

"In my sinful passion," he said, pounding his chest, "I kissed the little mole on the inside of Lucrezia's tender breast and nibbled the birthmark below her navel."

"Lecher!" Donna Veronica shrieked from the window. "Hypocrite!" Don Anselmo looked from the priest to his wife with an expression of consternation. "Libertine in priest's garments!" Donna Veronica cried. "It's true! He knows the marks on her body!"

Don Anselmo turned and shouted, "Fetch the gelding knife!"

Father Giovanni was congratulating himself on a convincing performance when Don Anselmo whirled and spied the trace of a grin on the priest's face.

The patriarch blinked and rubbed his chin. Stepping closer, he gripped Father Giovanni's shoulders and peered into his eyes. "You're playing games, aren't you, my friend?"

"You call our daughter's seducer a friend?" Donna Veronica shouted.

Paolo, looking perplexed, trotted up with the knife. "Which animal needs gelding, uncle?"

"None," said Don Anselmo, releasing his grip on the priest. "I was mistaken. Paolo, go at once and bring Lucrezia from Serafina's house. Have her here before nightfall."

With a bewildered shrug Paolo hastened to saddle a pair of mules.

"Are you letting this libertine off?" Donna Veronica demanded.

"Peace, woman. I know this man too well to believe he'd dishonor our friendship. I'll wager a wagonload of figs that somehow he hoodwinked Lucrezia into describing her mole and birthmark. Let's talk to the girl before we accept this ridiculous confession of his. Go," he said to the priest. "We'll talk later. Try not to create any more scandal."

Mortified, Father Giovanni trudged down the hill, squinting against the reflection of the sun from the ocean. The glare was less painful than the look he'd seen on the face of his old friend.

The village still dozed in the heat. Father Giovanni sat on the ledge of the fountain in the piazza and contemplated the mess he had made. Heaven had repaid his lying and scheming with humiliation and, probably, the estrangement of a valued companion. Whether he lived another week, year, or decade, Don Anselmo would never respect him again. And Lucrezia! He shriveled with shame at the thought of Lucrezia's reaction to his claimed seduction.

The clopping of hooves intruded on the priest's self-reproaches. Shadows blocked the sun,

and the hooves fell silent. Looking up, Father Giovanni beheld two lathered mules bearing strangers with holstered pistols on their belts and shotguns slung over their shoulders. Both men had narrow, grim-mouthed faces, noses like scimitars, and eyes like those of wolves.

"Are you the parish priest?" the taller of the two asked in a harsh, nasal voice.

"Yes, I am Father Giovanni. Who are you?"

"Francesco Frescobaldi," the man announced. "This is my cousin, Arnolfo." Francesco Frescobaldi pointed toward the orchards and farm buildings overlooking the village. "Is that Anselmo Ardentì's place?"

Petrified, Father Giovanni could only nod.

The Frescobaldis exchanged evil smiles. Francesco smirked at the priest. "We figured out that Ardentì's the one who's been sending conscience money to our aunt. The priest always takes cash to her after one of Ardentì's wagons comes to Palermo. Did you order him to pay her, priest? As penance for killing our uncle? If so, you signed Ardentì's death warrant."

Father Giovanni rose and croaked from a dry throat, "No . . . You mustn't . . . Vengeance is the Lord's! Don't damn your souls! Pray to the Virgin!"

"Preach to your own flock," Arnolfo Frescobaldi mocked.

"As for your Virgin, I give her this," said Francesco, lifting a fist in a lewd gesture.

The two men turned their backsides and the rumps of their mules to the priest and set off toward Don Anselmo's farm.

"Atheists!" Father Giovanni screamed. After all that had befallen him, to have these assassins mock his counsel and hurl sacrilege at Our Lady was more than he could tolerate.

"Blasphemers!" He drew the pistol from inside his jacket and trotted after the Frescobaldis, vaguely aware of banging shutters and startled voices. "Infidels! Devils! I won't let you murder my friend!"

"And how will you stop us?" asked Francesco, twisting around in the saddle. His sneer vanished when he saw the priest's weapon. Pulling the mule about, he unslung his long gun. Father Giovanni shot him in the chest. The shotgun discharged harmlessly into the ground as Francesco fell.

Both mules panicked. Arnolfo was thrown from the saddle. Lying in the dust, he clawed at his pistol. The priest shot him twice, and he lay still.

Purged of rage and feeling oddly serene, Father Giovanni looked down at the bleeding

Frescobaldis. Their wounds appeared mortal. Villagers were gathering. Tersely the priest explained why he'd shot the men and asked someone to fetch oil and water.

The Frescobaldis were too far gone to confess, but Father Giovanni managed to administer extreme unction to both of them while they still breathed. Possibly they repented as they died. If so, Father Giovanni might have saved their souls by shooting them before they could commit murder. This possibility comforted him.

Don Anselmo, Donna Veronica, and a dozen others from the Ardenti farm had joined the group encircling the priest and the dead men. Don Anselmo squeezed Father's Giovanni's hands, kissed his cheeks, and promised to have Masses said—for whose benefit was not clear.

The Frescobaldis' mules were captured and the corpses strapped across their saddles for a return trip to Palermo that very night, accompanied by several heavily armed Cabrigaglians. It was agreed that those possessing weapons should in future carry them in the village and that everybody would be alert for strangers.

A heroworshipping crowd escorted Father Giovanni home. Throughout the evening parish-

ioners appeared at his door bearing pizza, cheese, and fruit until he begged them to let him rest.

For the first time in over a year Father Giovanni enjoyed deep, restorative slumber.

In the morning he was astonished to find the church packed for Mass. Not wanting to depend on a latter-day miracle of the loaves, he sent for extra bread and wine for communion.

After the service Donna Veronica apologized for the names she had called him the day before. "You never should have invented that beastly story, father," she chided. "I talked to Lucrezia, and I'm convinced that nothing happened." She handed the priest a large pack-

et. "Try this herbal tea. It's an old remedy in our family, wonderful for the bowels."

Whether it was the tea or a renewed will to live or (as Father Giovanni believed) a miracle from heaven, the priest began to recover his health that very morning as he breakfasted on his parishioners' gifts. Within a month he was his old robust self, carrying out his pastoral duties with conscientious vigor and treated with reverence by everyone.

Everyone, that is, except Lucrezia Ardentì.

"Are you coming tonight, father?" she would tease when she saw him. "I'll leave a lamp burning." And Father Giovanni would turn scarlet.



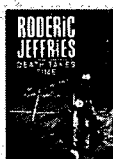
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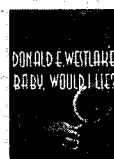
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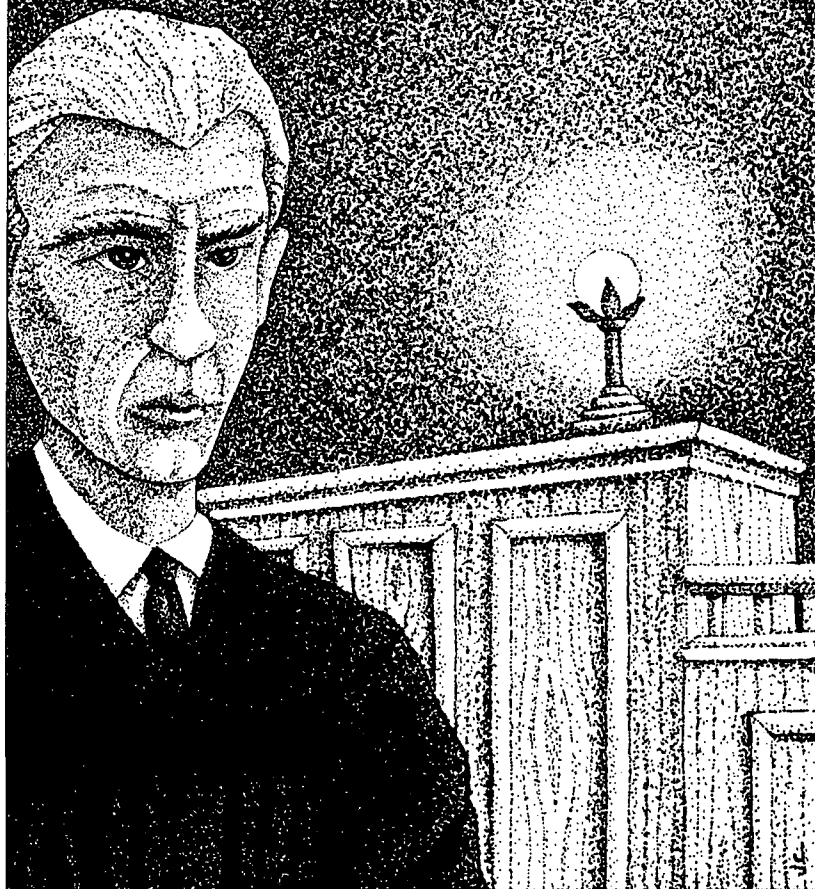


Illustration by Jeff Colson

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 8/96

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“D id you read this, Jane?” Lottie waved the *Golden City Courier* in my face. “They’re going to name the new city park for Judge Wilburton!”

I had no idea what she was getting all excited about, other than the fact that he hadn’t been a Cavanaugh. The Cavanaugh name is already on half the parks and buildings in Kern County, so I suppose we mustn’t get greedy.

“Can’t they come up with anybody better than him to name a park after?” she continued. “Besides, the old rascal’s been dead for years.”

“Those are usually the ones who get their names on parks,” I said. She was so busy ranting that the sarcasm escaped her. When her words finally slowed to a sputter, I interrupted. “It’s not good to get yourself worked up this way. I take it you knew Judge Wilburton?”

“Knew him!” She snorted. “Oh, I knew him, all right. I suppose you’re too young to remember him?”

Since Lottie had recently celebrated her ninety-fourth birthday, it is easy for her to regard a woman of sixty-six as young. While I will be the first to admit, nay, cherish, the fact that eccentricity runs in the Cavanaugh bloodline, Charlotte’s genes took a deeper draught than most from that particular pool.

She was the elder of two daughters, my mother, Lillian, being three years younger. In the early twenties, according to Lottie, folks referred to them as the Sugar & Spice Sisters, with her providing the spice. While she cavorted her way into the thirties, my mother, very much a lady, married a distant cousin who was also a Cavanaugh and settled into respectable domesticity.

Meanwhile Lottie embarked on a series of adventures and relationships with the wrong kind of men and, after her third husband disappeared with a bundle of local investors’ money (but that’s another story), spent over thirty years as a recluse inside this very house.

That had come to an end last year when she fell and was forced to call on me for help. Her reemergence into society has revitalized her tremendously.

“No, I don’t remember him,” I replied to her inquiry. “Should I?”

By now Lottie was wandering, back in her memories once more. “Let’s see, it was the summer of ’35 when the scandal broke. John Tinker, my favorite husband, had died the previous fall and left me utterly devastated.”

“I know your history backwards and forwards,” I broke in. “Tell me about Judge Wilburton.”



"There are lots of things you don't know about me, young lady, and you won't if I don't choose to tell you."

Lottie talked endlessly of her exploits, and I had begun to grow testy when listening to repeats. But Judge Wilburton was a new topic, and Lottie was a good storyteller.

"I'm sorry," I said, to save time. "Please tell me about Judge Wilburton."

Anway, as I was saying, John Tinker died in late September, and I went into a decline that lasted through the winter. Then Papa fell ill, so I moved back in here to help Mama and we made the blue room over into a bedroom for him.

Clarence Wilburton had come to Kansas as a fiery young prosecuting attorney before World War I and began to make a name for himself as a crusader—Prohibition certainly didn't hurt *him* any! When he decided to run for judge, he won handily. He was the type who gets noticed, by men *and* women, and when they started calling him "the hanging judge," just as a joke, he liked the image it created so much the nickname stuck.

I'd heard stories that he had an eye for the ladies, and when he cast his eyes my way that spring of '35, I reckon I looked right back. He was a good twenty years older than me, but he was a fine figure of a man with wavy silver hair and an aura of power that was pretty irresistible I'll tell you.

So we started sporting around, quietly of course, me being a recent widow and him being married and all . . .

"He was a married man?" I exclaimed.

"I just said that, didn't I?" Lottie retorted. "Don't go getting all huffy on me or I won't tell you anything."

I really didn't see that much of him. He had criminals to bring to justice, and Mama and I were kept busy here. It wasn't like other men weren't interested in me either, I want you to know. But what with the drought and the Depression and everything, Golden City wasn't exactly brimming over with exciting men who knew how to show a girl a good time.

So things went along well enough until, oh, I guess it was sometime in May. There was a knock at our front door one afternoon, and when Mama answered it, Dora Wilburton stood there.



"I'd like to speak to Charlotte if I may," she says to Mama without a by-your-leave or a how-are-you or anything.

Mama wasn't happy, I could tell that right away. But she never lost her dignity. "Won't you come in?" she said, nice as you please. "If you'll wait in the parlor, I'll send Lottie in."

Ha! I'd heard the whole thing from the kitchen. I took my apron off, smoothed my hair, and, avoiding Mama's fierce glare, went into the parlor and closed the door behind me.

"Won't you sit down?" I asked. "Can I bring you something to drink?"

"I don't think so," she said. The years had not been as kind to Dora as they had been to her husband—that's so often true, isn't it? Women don't age as well as men do. And the quickest thing that seems to go on a woman is her sense of fun, although I don't suppose you ever did have that, did you, Jane?

Okay, okay. Dora Wilburton. She was a Taggart, you know, and good looks have never been something you could accuse a Taggart of.

She just stood there, clutching her purse to her bosom as though I might steal it from her, so I sat down in Papa's rocker and leaned back and she finally settled on the edge of one of those parlor chairs with the humped seats that were so uncomfortable.

"Word has come to me that you are seeing my husband," she said with her chin in the air.

Since it wasn't a question, I didn't say anything.

"You're not the first woman he's dallied with."

I already knew that, so I stayed quiet.

"He'll never leave me to marry you, you know."

This pricked my pride sufficiently to force me to respond. "And who says I want to marry him? A man who fools around on his wife is not a man I'd have for a husband."

Dora wasn't any Timid Tillie, I'll give her that. She snapped right back at me, and we exchanged a few choice remarks from the safety of our chair cushions.

But when she delivered herself of the line, "All you Cavanaughs think you're so high and mighty, don't you? And you . . . you . . . you're nothing but a slut!" I stood up so quickly the rocker nearly flew over backwards.

"This is *my* home and *my* parlor you're sitting in, Dora Wilburton. Will you please leave?"

She rose and walked to the door. When she got there, she turned and said, "I presume you know he's seeing someone else?"

Well, that was a blow. And Dora could tell by my face that she'd scored.

She gave me a tight little smile, said, "Check out his lunches at the White Front Cafe," opened the door, and left.

While I hadn't mentioned anything to Papa and Mama about my fling with Clarence, I was aware that they were aware, if you know what I mean. So I wasn't exactly looking forward to having to deal with their reactions to Dora's visit.

You can imagine my delight when I walked in and saw your mother sitting at the kitchen table. I don't know how it is with other siblings, but with Lily and me, no matter how we differed between ourselves we presented a solid front to everyone else, and most especially to Mama and Papa.

"Oh, Lottie," Lily exclaimed. "Birdsall's Dry Goods has the most exquisite voile on sale, and I've been looking through the Vogue Fashion Book to try to find the perfect pattern."

"So!" Papa shouted. "Your carryin' on has brought down more shame upon us!"

"Lottie," Mama said in her quiet way. "How could you?"

"Gracious, all this commotion over nothing. Judge Wilburton was kind enough to offer his assistance in dealing with my affairs after John's death, and we met and talked a few times, that's all." I sat down next to Lily and began to flip through the pages of her magazine.

Papa continued to carry on about what a sick man he was and what an ungrateful daughter I was—he could throw a hissy fit, I'll tell you—while Mama beat her cake batter something fierce and Lily and I looked at patterns until finally Papa started coughing and gasping and we three women had to get him upstairs and put him to bed with some of his medication.

"You had a real talent for provoking Grandfather," I murmured.

"Everything provoked him," Lottie asserted. "He had a way of viewing anything that happened as a direct attack on him. Do you want to hear my story or not?"

"Of course I do."

"Fine. Then let me tell it."

Papa stayed in bed the next day and kept Mama and me running up and down those stairs the whole time. "A glass of milk," he'd say; and when we brought that to him, "Maybe just a little slice of that

~~~~~  
chocolate cake?" Or "Isn't it time for my medicine yet?" or "I'm hot," or "I'm cold."

What with one thing and another, two days—during which Papa continued to pout and Mama kept her lips pursed so tightly you'd think she had a mouthful of gold teeth—went by before I had a chance to get out of the house. I told Mama I was going to stop by Birdsall's after dropping off the grocery list so not to expect me right back.

Walking all that way downtown, of course I got tired and thirsty, so I thought I'd just stop in the White Front for a cherry phosphate before returning home.

It was nearly lunchtime and the cafe was starting to get crowded, so I took a seat at the counter. Since there were only two waitresses and one of them was Winifred Harbooth, who had grown kids, gray hair, and a bottom bigger than Straw Hill, right away I spotted what Dora Wilburton wanted me to see.

She was pretty, I suppose, in a flashy sort of way. Red hair that had to've come from a bottle; a good figure, although a trifle skinny for my taste; and Clara Bow lips well painted with bluish-red lipstick. She giggled and called out to men as she moved back and forth between the tables, so she obviously wasn't any shy violet. And she was young, twenty-one or -two maybe, at the most. I heard a couple of the men call her Earline.

I drank my phosphate quickly and went home. That afternoon while Papa and Mama were resting I called Clarence's office, determined to have it out with him. It's not that I wanted a future with him, you understand. I didn't. A good time for awhile was quite sufficient for me. But fooling around *on* me while he was fooling around on his wife *with* me, well, who needs that?

When Clarence's secretary, Shirley, answered the phone, I asked her to tell him that Mrs. Tinker had called with some questions about her husband's estate and would the judge please call her back.

Dinnertime came and went, and he still hadn't called. By then I was working myself up to a fine old froth. How dare he treat me like that? When Papa and I played checkers that night, I beat him four games in a row. He threw the board across the room and went to bed in a snit that was nearly the size of mine.

All the next day I tried to think of some excuse for a casual appearance at the courthouse, but not a single idea came to me. And

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that evening was my monthly whist game with the Selkirk twins and Emma Buttry.

Lottie reached for her lemonade and shifted her position in the chair.

"Are you tired?" I asked, concerned that she would wear herself out.

"No, no. I'm coming to the good part now, and I was just thinking how to tell it best."

Papa was on his high horse again the next morning, complaining about how nobody cared if he lived or died and such, so it was nearly eleven o'clock before I had a moment where I could make a phone call in private and give my little speech to Shirley.

"Oh my lord, Mrs. Tinker," she burst out, "you haven't heard. The judge's been murdered."

When I heard her words, I just dropped into a chair like I'd been hit by Joe Louis.

"Some kids found him this morning in his car down by the railroad bridge. Shot with his own gun. It's awful. Awful. I'm going through all his files now for Sheriff Hightower. He thinks one of the men the judge sentenced might've done it."

When I hung up, I immediately called Lily. Papa and Mama would find out about it soon enough, and I couldn't talk to them like I could to Lily.

Naturally it was the first thing reported on the local news that evening. Papa pointed his fork at me and said, "I told you not to have anything to do with that man. I knew he'd come to a bad end." Well, of course Papa'd never said anything of the kind, but you know how men are. They always have to be right about everything even if they aren't. Mama was at the stove with her back to me so I couldn't see how she took it, but later, after we'd put Papa to bed, she asked, "Did you love him very much?"

"No," I told her. "Not at all. It's just the shock of it."

She said, "Good," and we turned on the radio and listened to Burns and Allen.

In the days that followed, all sorts of stories floated around. Some gangster from Chicago had done it, a hobo had done it, a jealous judge, an angry lawyer. Shirley kept sorting through Clarence's files looking for a possible killer among the men he'd sentenced,

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deputies filled the jail with bums and vagrants, and Sheriff Hightower went back to taking snuff.

It didn't help matters any that Clarence had been shot with his own gun—he'd bragged for years to anyone who'd listen about how he kept it in his glove compartment—or that his body had been found where it was. Since it was outside the city limits, the Kern County Sheriff's Department quite naturally considered it their case. Harold Polsen, Golden City's politically aspiring police chief, hated the thought of all that attention and glory going elsewhere, so he and Floyd Hightower spent a lot of their time spitting epithets at one another, each of which was duly reported in the *Courier*, of course.

What with all this it was nearly a week before we heard the first rumor that a female might've done it. Heck, Lily and I'd tumbled onto that idea right away.

"Do you think Dora did it?" Lily asked me.

I thought about it. "I think she'd be more likely to shoot me," I said, "or Earline."

"She was pretty angry that day she came to see you."

"True. But I wasn't the first woman Clarence had trifled with. If Dora was going to shoot him, why now? Why not twenty years ago?"

"Maybe she's going through the . . . you know what . . . and it made her crazy. I've heard it can do that to you."

"Maybe Earline did it. Maybe Dora went and told her he was seeing me, and she got so upset she shot him." I rather liked this scenario; I could see Earline shouting and pleading and Clarence saying, "No, no, I'll die before I renounce my love for Lottie."

Lily was no more impressed with that idea than I had been about her menopause theory. "We don't know anything about Earline," she said. "What if she has a husband? Or a brother who'd kill anyone who fooled around with her?"

One thing we both agreed on: Earline was definitely an unknown quantity. We needed more information about her, and the sooner the better.

The White Front Cafe wasn't much, a little place up on Main where the new bank building is now, but it drew a big crowd during the day from people who worked downtown. Lily and I waited until after the lunch crowd had thinned, then sat in a back booth so we could watch.

"She looks like a tramp," Lily whispered.

"She probably is a tramp," I whispered back.





We both ordered huckleberry pie and coffee. Earline's smile wasn't nearly as wide for us as it was for the male customers; even Lily remarked on this, so you needn't think I'm making that up just to make Earline look bad.

When she delivered our pie, Lily said, "Goodness, this must keep you on the run. All these people! However do you remember what everyone wants?"

"I write it down," Earline said with a country twang.

"Are you from around here?"

"Up north of Cassville. Why?"

"Oh, I just wondered. I didn't remember seeing you around town."

The cook hollered at her about that time, so we set to eating our pie.

"Did you see her hands?" Lily shuddered. "Her nails are bitten down to the quick. I'm so grateful Mama broke us of that habit."

"The scarlet nail polish didn't help. Who do we know from Cassville?"

We were so engrossed in our conversation that when a man's voice said, "Well, lookie who's here. Miz Lottie Tinker. Just the woman I've been wanting to talk to," I nearly dropped a forkful of huckleberry pie in my lap.

Floyd Hightower used to be fun in his younger days, before he got married, had four kids and started taking his position as sheriff seriously. He plopped down on the seat beside Lily before we even had a chance to think.

"How's Ruthann?" Lily asked him real quick, to give me some time. "And the kids?"

"They're fine, Lily, just fine. I wanted to ask Lottie a couple of questions. . . ."

"Are you going to 'grill' me, Floyd?" I said. "Right here in a public place?"

"Oh, surely not," Lily chimed in, smooth as butter. "Floyd would never subject a lady to such humiliation, would you, Floyd?"

Neither Lily nor I ever had much trouble dealing with men, and when you put the two of us together, we had absolutely no trouble at all. Floyd Hightower's face was turning a lovely shade of crimson when Earline arrived at the table to take his order.

"I'll be at Lily's house this afternoon at two, Floyd," I said, "if you wish to speak with me. Meanwhile, you might want to have a visit with Earline here. Lily, are you ready to go?"

The sheriff showed up at two on the dot, then proceeded to hem

and haw and fool with his belt loops until I finally said, "I assume you heard some rumor to the effect that Judge Wilburton and I might be more than friends."

A big whoosh of air came out of his mouth.

"Just out of curiosity . . . ?" I urged.

"Dora Wilburton is a mite upset, being a sudden widow and all. She made a few . . . remarks . . . that I feel obliged to follow up on."

"I don't suppose it occurred to her when she was making those remarks that if they were true she'd be far more likely to shoot her husband than I would?"

"Are they true?"

"The judge was counseling me on my financial affairs after my husband's death," I said in a very proper tone of voice.

"Oh," Floyd said.

"And you could say we got friendly a time or two."

"Oh," Floyd said.

"But I didn't kill him. Why would I? Besides, as it happens, I was playing whist that night with the Selkirk twins and Emma Buttry."

"Oh," Floyd said.

"Is that all you can say, Floyd Hightower?"

Lily joined us then with a pitcher of lemonade and glasses, and I can't say who was more relieved, Floyd or me. I don't know whether he figured he'd gotten all he needed to know from me or what, but after that he relaxed and even passed on a snippet or two of information.

The research into the judge's files had turned up several men who had made threats when they were sentenced, but so far each and every one of them was accounted for. The racketeering angle had been checked, although it had never been considered a serious possibility. Floyd wouldn't say anything about the local political angle, which was probably very wise of him considering all the Cavanaugh fingers that were in that pie, including your stepfather's, as I recall.

"He was a good man." I leapt quickly to my stepfather's defense.

"He was so boring he had to be good," Lottie said.

Since it was an old familiar debate between the two of us, I let it slide this time. "Did the sheriff really believe you might've been the killer?" I asked.

"I don't think so. He was checking out everything and everybody, as he should've done, and my name cropped up. I do know he spoke

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with Emma and the twins—very discreetly, by the way, which surprised me—about the times of our arrivals and departures.”

May turned into June and there were no arrests. The Golden City Bank got robbed, so Police Chief Polsen had to switch his priorities and leave the judge’s murder to the county to solve. The newspaper ran out of new angles on the story and turned its focus on whether the current heat wave would ruin this summer’s crops.

When the judge’s body finally was released, Dora had a big funeral—terribly tasteless, of course, but that was Dora for you. I wanted to go, but Mama said no, it would be most improper, and I reckon she was right. No sense dropping down to Dora’s level. I just hated to miss anything interesting.

Sure enough, at the cemetery, Dora threw herself on the casket sobbing her eyes out. Emma Buttry said it took two men to drag her off it. I would have loved to have seen that.

June melted into July and we all took to sitting out on the porch of an evening, fanning ourselves and hoping to catch a breeze. About the only piece of news on Clarence’s death came from Lily’s investigation of Earline.

“Her folks live on a hardscrabble farm up north of Cassville all right,” Lily said. “Earline’s the oldest of seven and had a reputation for being wild. Far from being protective of her, seems the whole lot of them was relieved when she decided to move out. The biggest surprise appears to be that she stayed in Golden City. The locals figured her for Kansas City or Chicago. She probably took the job at the White Front to pick up enough money to move on and the judge spotted her there.”

“Then why hasn’t she ‘moved on,’ ” I said, “unless the sheriff told her to stay put?”

“Uh-uh.” Lily shook her head and grinned. “Seems Earline has found herself another fella already. A trucker by the name of Joe Tubbs who comes through here regularly.”

“That doesn’t mean she couldn’t have killed Clarence,” I snapped.

“Oh, don’t be hurt, Lottie. You wouldn’t be happy with a truck driver anyway.”

“So did Earline kill him?” I asked.

“I haven’t reached the end of the story yet.” Lottie stretched and asked for a refill of coffee. She has the most annoying habit of dragging out the last bit of a tale, just to keep me dangling.



When I had brought her coffee, and another slice of prune Danish, she said casually, "The murder never was officially solved."

"You mean to tell me you've kept me on pins and needles this whole time and you don't know who killed him?"

"I didn't say that."

"Ah," I said, and sat down.

Papa was napping, and Mama and I were canning one afternoon in late July when there was a knock at the door. We were both aglow with perspiration and up to our elbows in tomato skins. There'd been no rain for weeks; crops and gardens were burning to a crisp, so everyone was busy trying to save all the produce they could. Mama looked at me and I shrugged; I had no idea who would come calling at such an inopportune time.

Imagine my surprise when I walked down the hall and saw Sheriff Hightower peering through the screen.

"Sorry to bother you, Lottie," he said. "I just wanted to ask a couple more questions about Judge Wilburton."

"You must be up a creek if you're back on my doorstep," I answered, exasperated. But I'd have done most anything to get out of canning for awhile, so I let him in and took him into the parlor, where he sank onto a chair and wiped his brow.

"I am, and that's a fact," he said. "We've followed lead after lead, and so far it's got us nowhere. I tell you, I'm flat up against a wall, and that's the truth."

He looked so downright dejected I felt sorry for him. "I don't know what I can tell you, Floyd. Have you talked to Dora?"

"Till I'm blue in the face. She can't imagine anyone who would harm her husband unless it was . . ."

"Me?" He nodded. "That's ridiculous. Whyever would I want to kill him?"

Floyd wiped his brow some more. "Well, uh, Dora seemed to think he was . . . uh . . ."

"Yes?"

"Rejecting your advances," he said in a rush.

I actually laughed. What colossal nerve! "Well, when you figure out how I could've done it when I was with Emma Buttry and the Selkirk twins all evening, you just hurry right back here and snap those legirons on me," I said, standing. My sympathy for his troubles had been short-lived. "Till then, Floyd Hightower, I suggest you

check on Dora Wilburton or that hussy who works at the White Front."

"I've checked on ever'body in Kern County nearabouts, for all the good it's done." He got up and followed me to the front door like a whipped pup. I couldn't help wondering if he was reduced to going door to door just to see if anyone would confess. As he got in his car, I heard Papa shouting from upstairs.

"What did the sheriff want?" he demanded the minute I walked into his room.

"Nothing, Papa. Don't fret yourself. It's not good for you."

"Sheriff doesn't come calling in the middle of the day for nothin'."

Mama and I finally got him calmed down, but it was that very night he had the stroke. Doc Melby came, but there was nothing he could do. Papa's whole left side was paralyzed, and he never spoke right again after that.

We hired Bessie Washington to come in. It was more than Mama and I could handle, and Lily had a husband and all you kids to see to. Even with Bessie's help, by the time Papa died on the first of September we were all worn to a frazzle. Neither of us had left the house with the exception of errands, Mama had lost weight, I needed a perm; as for what was happening anywhere but in our own little world, we hadn't a clue. When we heard Will Rogers had died in a plane crash, well, it just seemed as if one bad thing came right on top of another, and a person could only absorb so much.

The night after Papa was buried Lily stayed until Mama went up to bed. She would've stayed the night, but I told her there was no reason. It was over; maybe we could all rest now.

I had a last cup of coffee, rinsed the pot, and set it by the stove for the next morning. I climbed the stairs and stopped by Mama's room, thinking she'd be asleep by then. But she lay there in the dark with her eyes wide open.

"Can I bring you something?" I asked softly.

"I killed him, you know."

I soothed her tousled hair back into its braid. "He'd been sick a long time, Mama. You had nothing to do with it."

"Not Papa. Clarence Wilburton."

I figured she was in shock, so I kept calm. "You're tired, Mama. You don't know what you're saying."

"Oh but I do. That day Dora came to the house I could've twisted both your necks. Hankering after a man who would trifle with your affections like that? Shame on you! Then I got to thinking as how

the two of you were victims of that man and his lust. Oh, I know you're no angel. But you had just been widowed, and you were vulnerable. And then! Then he dared, *dared* to make you look foolish while he bandied with a waitress? The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. So I sent him a note: 'I yearn for you to hold me in your arms. Meet me tonight under the trestle bridge at ten o'clock.' I left it unsigned. I figured a man of his ego couldn't resist."

"Oh, Mama," I whispered.

"You should've seen his face when this old woman drove up and climbed in his car beside him." She laughed, a harsh sound like I'd never heard her make before.

"Oh, Mama," was all I could say. "Oh, Mama, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? Don't be. It was the best thing that happened all summer."

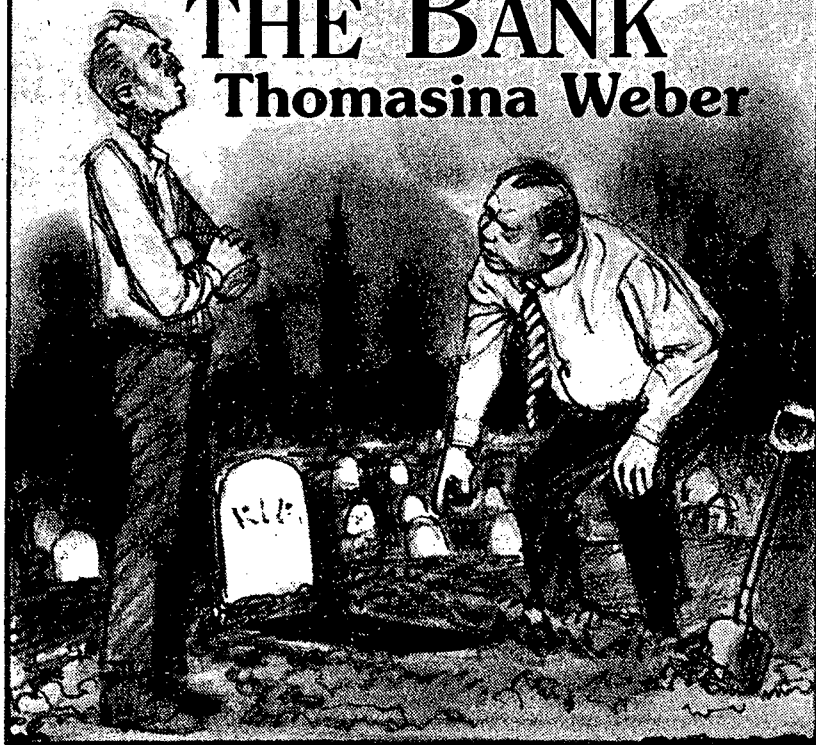
"Grandmother killed him? I don't believe it," I said.

"Come now, Jane." Lottie smiled at me. "It took me a while to believe it myself. But did you really think any Cavanaugh woman worth her salt would let a man humiliate her daughter?"

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MONEY IN THE BANK

Thomasina Weber



Rocky's euphoria lasted only as far as the North Carolina state line. That was when he noticed the blue Chevy following him. It had probably been following him all night, but who could see in the dark? Certainly not Rocky. As he groaned through middle age,

his eyesight was deteriorating faster than anything else. He'd be lucky if he weren't as blind as a mole before he turned fifty-five.

It had to be Henry coming after the money. Rocky had picked up the ransom at midnight and headed south an hour

later. He had tricked the creep into thinking the drop was to be made at twelve thirty. Not that either of them had any right to the money, but friend or no friend, it's every man for himself.

It had been just a run-of-the-mill kidnapping with a run-of-the-mill drop, not any more complicated than the pickups he had been doing for years for Mr. Pendergast, but Rocky had fouled it up. Actually Henry was the one who did it. Henry, a perfect stranger, picked up the ransom and then, when Rocky confronted him, denied it. And to think he was dumb enough to believe the creep! But Rocky had been smart enough to smooth it over with Mr. P. and arrange for a second ransom by convincing Mr. Miller that Mr. P. would kill the Miller daughter if he refused to pay.

Until now, Rocky had been reveling in his success, which proved that he wasn't losing his touch after all. Until now—until he noticed the car tailing him.

But maybe the Chevy wasn't following him at all. Almost everybody heading south took the interstate. He could remember driving to Florida on 301 years ago, before the interstate was completed. It was mainly a two lane road, and by the time you got to Florida, you and your fellow drivers practically knew

one another. But on the interstate, unknown cars and trucks whizzed by all the time. That was what was so strange about the Chevy: it didn't whiz. If he slowed, the Chevy slowed. It had to be Henry. Or maybe Mr. Miller. He hadn't liked paying two ransoms for his daughter. Or Mr. Pendergast? No, because he was in prison, thanks to Rocky's call to the police after the pickup. Although you couldn't tell these days. Maybe they'd let him out to make room for a dangerous criminal, like a check forger.

Rocky's stomach grumbled. He'd have to get something to eat soon. He'd take the next exit with a restaurant; that ought to prove something.

It did. The Chevy left the interstate, too, but it kept going. Giddy with relief, Rocky entered the restaurant and had a double order of everything including dessert. One of these days he'd have to go on a diet, but not today. Today was a celebration.

It didn't last long. Back on the highway, he saw the Chevy again. He reached for his antacid pills. He should have known he couldn't be that lucky.

The Chevy followed him all the way to Florida, but Rocky was no closer to identifying the driver by the time he reached the Gulf Coast. Although Miami seemed a good place to get lost

in, he would never go there. There were too many criminals on the streets.

He left the interstate shortly before sunset and drove inland. He checked into BITSY'S—THE ONLY MOTEL IN TOWN!, locked the door behind him, and stretched out on the concrete bed. He'd sleep anyway because he had lost the Chevy. Tomorrow he would find a town to stay in. He would also have to find a place to hide the money.

The next morning he discovered that Bitsy also owned the diner next door. After one bite of breakfast, Rocky realized that with a monopoly like that she had no need to strive for quality. Without a doubt, his breakfast would be with him for the rest of the day. Before leaving, he replenished his supply of antacid tablets.

As he started the car, he pictured the Chevy tooling down the interstate, its driver wondering what had happened to his quarry. The road made a sharp turn as it left the little town, and Rocky, admiring the scenery, almost hit a car that pulled out of a side street in front of him. The cat that ran in front of that car was not so lucky, however. Rocky put on his flashers and got out, incredulous that the wild driver hadn't even stopped.

The cat was still alive, and

Rocky lifted it gently onto his car seat. He recalled seeing an animal hospital a short distance back. He had always wanted a pet of his own, but his mother wouldn't allow one. The boy next door had had a dog, and when he and Rocky went fishing, the dog always went along. Rocky used to pretend that the dog was his.

The veterinarian could do nothing for the cat except to put her out of her misery. Tears welled in Rocky's eyes.

"I understand," said the doctor. "All pet owners feel that way. If it will help, there's a pet cemetery a few blocks ahead."

The veterinarian gave him a towel to wrap the body in, and Rocky left. He stopped in the parking lot of a grocery store to think. He should have left the cat at the hospital. Now he would have to dispose of it. Well, everyone's entitled to a decent burial, he thought, and since he had never had a pet of his own to do for, maybe this would make up for it.

He had no idea how much it would cost to bury the cat but probably more than he had in his wallet. He would have to dip into his capital. He drew the duffel bag from under the seat and extracted some cash. As he looked at the balance of the sixty thousand dollars, an idea came to him. What better place

to hide it than in a coffin? He was in no hurry to spend it. He could take out enough to live on for quite a while. Then all he'd have to do when he was positive that the Chevy was gone for good was visit the cemetery and remove it. How hard could it be to dig up such a small grave? Everything happens for a reason, he murmured as he left the parking lot.

It was called The Waiting Room. The owner, a small, mousy man with bad breath, introduced himself. "I am Mr. Owens, and it is my privilege to serve you in your hour of sorrow."

"Uh, I'm Mr.—Mr. Ward. William Ward. That name—The Waiting Room—?"

"Ah yes, many inquire about that. Our cemetery is merely a room of sorts in which beloved pets await reunion with their masters in the Hereafter."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that," said Rocky.

"He? This is a female."

"Oh, yeah. I meant to say she."

"You will no doubt want a marker. They all do. What is her name?"

"Name? Uh—Rocky," he said, without thinking.

"That's an unusual name for a female cat," remarked Mr. Owens.

Rocky blushed. Wouldn't he

ever learn not to put his foot in his mouth? "Yeah. Well—she's named after them dancers in New York. You know, the ones that kick."

"I see." Mr. Owens pursed his lips. "If you'll step into my office—"

Rocky returned to The Waiting Room the next afternoon for the cat's burial. She was tastefully laid out in the small casket he had selected.

"I'll give you a few moments for your private farewell," said Mr. Owens.

"I'd appreciate that," said Rocky. "I wonder—I mean—would you let me close the casket myself?"

Mr. Owens tilted his head to one side. "I've never had a request like that, Mr. Ward, but I don't see why not. Of course you may."

It took no more than ten minutes to conceal the money, packed now in a waterproof bag, and close the casket. He stayed with it until it was safely underground.

Again Rocky was in a celebratory mood. Though he liked the feeling, he wondered if he was turning into a manic-depressive. He had heard it was a genetic disorder, but he was unaware of any relatives so afflicted. Of course with his luck he could be the first.

After the burial, he wolfed down a gargantuan dinner at the diner—it was also the only diner in town—and decided to spend the evening watching TV. Tomorrow he would find a nice apartment and start to live again. He liked this town, and the money was safe, so his mind was at ease.

He opened the door to his room and flicked the wall switch.

"Rocky Pinkerman, I presume?" Henry Hackle said from one of the two armchairs.

Rocky sagged against the door. "Henry?" He hardly recognized the creep. He had cut his scraggly blond hair and wore a clean shirt with his jeans. "What are you doing here?"

"Congratulating myself. You have no idea the trouble you put me to after you left the interstate. I missed the exit you took and had to go miles to the next one. Then I had to double back and check every motel in every one-horse town until I got here. Too bad you weren't smart enough to park in the back."

"Gee, I'm sorry, Henry, but why did you follow me?"

"As if you didn't know. Seems to me you have something of mine."

"I don't have anything of yours."

"I suppose those ransoms belong to you?"

"They sure don't belong to you."

"Technically they don't belong to either of us. But that's beside the point. You really abused our friendship, Rocky, when you made off with my cache. Especially after I was good enough to let you spend the night at my place so Mr. Pendergast wouldn't find you."

"In case you've forgotten, Henry, you swore you didn't pick up that first ransom. It was just luck that I found it stashed in your collection of paperbacks."

"Friends don't snoop when they're guests in someone's apartment."

"Well, you were planning to beat me to that second ransom, even though I told you Mr. P. was going to kill me if I didn't deliver it. What kind of friend would have done that?"

"I guess we're even then. Let's just split the money, and I'll go back home."

Rocky sat down on the bed. His dinner was wedged halfway to his stomach. He had never felt closer to a heart attack.

"I'm glad you're not mad, Henry. I was afraid you would be."

"Oh, I was plenty mad, but the trip gave me time to cool off. If I was a violent person, I would have been mad enough to kill you, but then again it's a re-

al bother to have to get rid of a body. Especially one as big as yours."

"That ain't a nice thing to say, Henry."

"Maybe not, but you ought to take better care of yourself."

"I intend to."

"Good. Now, if you'll give me my money, I'll be on my way."

"I'm not giving you any money, Henry."

The creep sighed. "Why can't I get through to you, Rocky?"

"Look, Henry, you don't need the money. You're on welfare, and you live a life of leisure. Your money comes in regularly, and you've got enough left over to buy all them paperback mysteries. And besides, you're young. I'm fifty-four years old, not likely to live till sixty, the way I feel, and I can't earn a living. I need that money."

"I feel for you, Rocky, really I do, but not enough to support you."

"Nothing you can do about it, Henry."

"Maybe you're right. I'll drive back to Jersey. Then I'll go and visit Mr. Pendergast in jail. I'll give him your regards. Also your address. He has a lot of friends, you know, who'd like to do him a favor."

Rocky dropped his head to his hands. His palms were sweaty. "Tell you what. Let me sleep on

it. I'll meet you tomorrow, and we'll work something out."

"All right, Rocky." He moved to the door. "By the way, I've got a room at the end." With a smile, he left.

How could Rocky have thought his luck had changed? He was born jinxed and would die jinxed. But not for a while, he hoped.

Rocky's brain dropped into neutral. He had to do something, but for the life of him, he could not come up with an idea. He needed more time. If he had the money on hand, he could just take off. Sure, the chase would start all over again, but he would gain enough time to figure out a solution.

He sat up straight. The money wasn't far away. After all, he had planned to dig it up eventually. Why not now?

The Waiting Room was within easy walking distance of Bitsy's. His folding shovel tucked under his arm, Rocky headed for the cemetery.

It was a hot, sticky night, and he was soaked with perspiration by the time he got there. At least one thing was in his favor: the moon was obscured by clouds. But not exactly favorable, he realized, as he stumbled over a monument. He had not thought to bring a flashlight. How was he going to find the

right grave? A raised mound of earth would identify it, but he would have to be able to see the mound, and right now Rocky couldn't see his own hand in front of his nose.

He tried to remember the path he had taken at the burial, but the darkness and his anxiety erased his memory. He closed his eyes and willed his intuition to take over. Left, it said. Go left.

He turned left. He began to count his steps in case he had to retrace them. Engrossed in the count and the strain to see where he was placing his feet, Rocky bumped into something soft and let out a yell. The something he bumped into also yelled, and a brilliant flash blinded him.

"Who the hell are you?" said the voice behind the light.

"Uh—uh—" Rocky gasped for breath.

"And what are you doing with that shovel?"

"Uh—"

"Come to rob a grave, did you? You don't look like a sicko."

"Oh, oh, I'm not. I just came to—"

"Can't always tell, though. We've had a few over the years. Threw the book at 'em," the other man declared proudly.

"Look, I'm not here to rob a grave." But of course he was,

Rocky thought. That's exactly what he was here for.

"See if the cops believe you, weirdo."

"Come to think of it, who are you?"

The flashlight left Rocky's face and turned to illuminate the face of the elderly gravedigger. "I work here."

"At night?"

"I live here, too." Rocky had the sudden, absurd idea that he occupied an empty grave. "Got a shack at the back corner. Can't sleep most nights, so I walk around a bit."

"Gee, that's too bad," said Rocky, thinking he'd rather toss and turn than prow around a cemetery in the dark. "Well, I'll be seeing you." He turned to leave.

"Just hold on a minute, young fella." Rocky had only a few seconds to bask in the compliment. "You ain't going nowhere. In case you've forgotten, you're trespassing and maybe worse."

"Oh, that," said Rocky, attempting an air of nonchalance. "I couldn't sleep either."

"Well, a shovel wouldn't help you. Let's go."

Rocky slumped in the chair before the sheriff's desk, an offended Mr. Owens and the disheveled gravedigger flanking him. Rocky wondered how the man who had caught him had

the strength to dig graves. He looked about seventy years old, weighing one pound for each year. He was probably grateful to have a job, since it was obvious he hadn't left his life's employment with a golden parachute.

"Can I make a phone call?" asked Rocky.

"Just one," said the sheriff. "And it'll cost you fifty cents."

"Fifty cents! A pay phone is only a quarter."

"This is a small town, buddy. We gotta make our money where we can."

"Where's the phone?"

"Right here on my desk."

"Oh." Rocky looked up the number of the motel and dialed it. "Hello, Henry? This is Rocky—I mean, William. Hey, I need you to do me a favor." There was a pause in which the other three men smirked at each other. "Well, I'm in jail. Yeah, that's what I said. I need you to bail me out. Uh, for grave robbing." He listened and squirmed, glad his audience couldn't hear the other end of the conversation. "I'll wait right here for you."

"Damn right you will," said the sheriff.

Rocky almost wished he was back in the sheriff's office. Henry hadn't stopped talking since he'd picked Rocky up. "I

don't believe any of this, Rocky. In the first place, what makes that two-bit sheriff think he's entitled to bail?"

"It's a small town, Henry. They have to make money wherever they can."

"And in the second place, what were you doing in a pet cemetery trying to rob a grave?"

Rocky realized there was no possible explanation, other than the truth, that would sound like anything but utter insanity. By the time they were back in his room, he had told Henry the whole story.

"It serves you right," said Henry, "trying to con a friend."

"Look who's talking."

"That's in the past, Rocky. We agreed on that. This is a new con. You were going to dig up that money and run out on me. How am I ever going to trust you again?"

Rocky shrugged. "I guess you'll just have to take my word."

"Okay. The money is safe, but it's too safe. We've got to figure some way of getting it back." Henry went to the door. "Sleep on it, Rocky, and I'll do the same. Maybe by morning one of us will come up with an idea."

All Rocky came up with by morning was a king-sized headache. He was not cut out for stress like this. Some people could handle anything life threw

at them, but not Rocky. He should have taken that ransom money and bought a shack out in the woods somewhere on a little piece of land where he could raise vegetables and chickens and maybe have a cow for milk and forget about the rest of the world.

"Well, Rocky, got any bright ideas?" asked Henry as they shared a breakfast table at the diner.

He *had* thought of an idea, but he wasn't about to reveal it to Henry. "No. You?"

"Afraid not. But there's no hurry, actually. Why, that money in the cemetery is like money in the bank. I do think, though, that we ought to let things die down a little. Give the local law a chance to forget about you so if something goes wrong you won't be the first one to be nailed."

"Well, don't that sound promising? Why shouldn't they nail you instead?"

"That's the luck of the game, Rocky. I'm just a little smarter than you are, that's all."

"I guess that comes from reading all those mystery stories. They lay out all the answers, don't they?"

"Pretty well. Criminals have gotten some of their best ideas from the written word."

"Don't that make you mad?"

"Why should it? I'm learning, too, and I think everyone has to

learn if only in order to protect himself. I never told you this, Rocky, but it's my dream to someday own a bookstore. And you know what? The only books I'm going to handle are mysteries. Maybe I'll even find time to write my own."

"Gee, Henry, that's quite a goal. Wish I had something in mind like that. Gives you something to look forward to, don't it?"

"Yes, but I have to take one step at a time, and the first one is to get my share of the ransom. Who knows, this town might be where I open my shop. In fact, I believe I'll check out the business district right now. I like this place."

Henry took off toward town, and Rocky walked to the cemetery. The day was warm and pleasant, and he actually enjoyed the stroll. It was mid-morning, so he didn't think there would be any burials this early.

Apparently one was scheduled for later that day because he found the gravedigger hard at work one grave away from the cat's.

"Good morning," Rocky said, determined to let bygones be bygones.

The man looked up from his work and wiped a gnarled hand across his forehead. "Oh, it's

you. Gonna do your dirty work in the daylight this time?"

Rocky smiled. "That was all a mistake," he said.

"I'll bet."

"Why don't you take a break? Looks like you could use one. Put down your shovel and rest a while."

"Guess it wouldn't hurt none." He eased himself onto the grass beside Rocky. "Ain't seen you around here. Before last night, that is."

"Just passing through. Had a little business here to take care of."

"Yeah. Grave robbing."

"How about you? Been here long?"

"All my life."

"When are you going to retire?"

"Retire? You're a real joker. If I want to eat more than cat food, I'd better keep working."

"How would you like to earn some extra money, tax free?"

He laughed. "You want me to moonlight? I'm seventy-six years old, for God's sake!"

"You could call it that. It would just be a one-time thing. Easiest money you'd ever make."

"What kind of money are we talking about?"

Rocky sighed inwardly. He'd always been an easy touch. That money would have to last Rocky all his life, but this poor guy did-

n't have much life left, and he shouldn't have to work so hard. "Five thousand dollars."

The old man stared at him. "What would I have to do? Kill the president?"

Rocky smiled. "It's a lot easier than that. I buried something in the coffin with my cat, and now I want it back. That's why I was here last night, only you caught me."

"So you want me to dig it up for you?"

"No. I just want to be able to come back late tonight and not get in trouble again."

The old man rubbed his chin. "Must be something valuable."

"To me it is—sentimental value, you know."

"Like what?"

"Well, you see, my mother had a cat she loved, more than me I sometimes think. Anyway, she treated it like a baby—took pictures of it and everything. Even framed some of them and hung them on the walls. One day the cat ran away and never came back. She hunted for weeks but couldn't find it. After that she'd never allow another pet in the house. Would you believe that she kept that cat's food and water dishes on the mantel like some people keep family pictures? Anyhow, she fell on hard times, and by the time she died, she didn't have nothing to leave to me except what was in her

house. I sold everything but those cat dishes. I couldn't bring myself to get rid of those." Rocky could hardly believe the ease with which he spun out the lies, one after another. Maybe he had a hidden talent he had never suspected.

"Well, when I found this cat—the one I just buried over there—" He pointed at the grave and sighed. He thought that was a nice touch. "When I found her, I could hardly believe that it was a dead ringer for my mother's cat. You might think it's silly, but I believe that cat was my mother reincarnated. When she was killed, it was like my mother died all over again. So I buried the cat dishes with her. Now that I've had time to get over the shock of losing her and to think about it, I can see it was a mistake. So I want to get those dishes back and put them in a place of honor, just like my mother did."

"That's quite a yarn," said the gravedigger. If the old man hadn't brushed quickly at his eye, Rocky might have thought he was being sarcastic. "And it's worth five thousand to get them back?"

"Yes," said Rocky, gazing off into the distance.

"Okay. Come back after midnight. I'll have it open for you."

Rocky got to his feet and ex-

tended his hand. "You're a good man," he said. "Thank you."

Rocky spent a restless, endless afternoon walking around town, unable to confine himself to his motel room. Finally, in desperation, he took in a movie where he consumed a tub of popcorn and two giant sodas. It wasn't until he returned to the motel and saw Henry's car was gone that it occurred to him that Henry wasn't above beating him to the cemetery, daylight or not. Where were his brains? Why hadn't he thought of such a possibility earlier? He was debating whether to go in search of him when Henry's car turned in.

"Did you have a nice day, Rocky?" he asked as he got out.

"Yes. Did you?" Henry seemed unusually pleased with himself.

"Couldn't have been better," said Henry. "I found a vacant store that looks promising. I also found a real nice restaurant in the next town. What say we go there for dinner instead of that greasy spoon next door?"

"Are we celebrating?"

"Yes. We're celebrating this beautiful Florida weather and just being alive. Isn't that cause enough?"

They took Henry's car to the restaurant, and Rocky had to admit the food was superb. He limited himself to only one dessert, though. He had work to

do tonight, and he couldn't afford to be logy. Henry suggested the movie house, and Rocky tried to appear enthusiastic. Suffering through the same picture twice was a small price to pay for keeping an eye on Henry and not having to make conversation with him.

At last it was over. "That film gave me a headache," said Henry as he pulled up to the motel. "I'm going to take a fistful of aspirin and go to bed."

"Good idea," said Rocky. "Nothing like a good sleep to get rid of a headache."

Rocky thought midnight would never come. His duffel bag was packed and ready, and so was he. Just before twelve he put out his light and opened the door cautiously. Henry's car still stood before his room at the other end of the building. Fingers crossed, Rocky got into his own car and started it up, thankful for the noise of the motel's prehistoric window air conditioners.

He arrived at the cemetery within five minutes, much more at ease than the first time he had tried this. Confidently he made his way toward the cat's grave, his heart pounding with excitement. If he was ever going to have a heart attack, he hoped it wouldn't be now. A cemetery was no place to have a heart attack.

He had brought his flashlight this time, and he rounded the bend and played the light ahead at his destination. There was the fresh mound, all right, just as promised. He hurried forward and looked down at the casket in the open grave. A note was taped to the top. It read, *Like I said, that was quite a yarn. If we ever meet again, remind me to tell you how I bought the Brooklyn Bridge.* It was not signed.

Rocky drove slowly back to the motel. How was he going to explain this to Henry? Even worse, Henry would never leave him now. He would never rest until he had what he considered to be his share of the ransoms. Henry would be Rocky's albatross.

He dragged himself out of the car and knocked on Henry's door.

"Rocky?" Henry rubbed sleepy eyes.

"Hey, Henry. Did you get rid of your headache?"

"Did you wake me up to ask me about my headache?"

"Not exactly."

"Well? Why did you wake me up?"

"I hate to bother you in the middle of the night like this, but there's something I gotta tell you."

"It couldn't wait until morning?"

"I guess so." He turned to go. Maybe he could get in his car and hit the road—

"On second thought—"

Rocky stopped. He should have known better.

"Maybe you'd better tell me tonight." Henry sounded completely awake now.

Rocky sighed. He looked his albatross straight in the eye. "Our bank—you know, the one we got the money in? Well, it went belly up."

For a moment Henry just stared at him. Then he said, "Maybe you'd better come in."

Feeling like king of the fools, Rocky dropped into a chair and studied the pattern on the carpet.

"From the beginning, Rocky." Henry took the opposite chair and leaned on the round table.

With a sigh, Rocky handed Henry the gravedigger's note.

"Which means?"

"I admit it. I was going to con you again. But I had a right to, you know. After all, if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't even be involved in this thing."

"That's beside the point, friend. Continue."

"I promised the gravedigger some money if he'd let me dig up the grave. I guess he didn't believe the reason I gave him. So he beat me to it."

"Oh, Rocky, what am I going to do with you? Why can't you

just accept the fact that we were partners in crime and let it go at that?"

"Like I told you before, I need that money."

"And so do I, Rocky. So we're not going to let that skinny little thief have it."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to find him, of course."

"How?"

"It's up to you to start the search. First thing in the morning, you go to the cemetery and find out if he left a forwarding address. You could also try the post office."

"What are you going to do?"

"Remember I told you yesterday that I found the shop I want? The realtor is working with the owner on a rental deal, but I have to hurry. Otherwise I'll be paying rent on a store that isn't open yet for business. So in the morning I've got to start for home to load up my books and get back as fast as I can."

"You haven't got enough books in that apartment to open a bookstore."

"Of course not. There's only about a thousand in the apartment. It's those in the storage warehouse I've got to get. I've been collecting them all my life, you know."

"Yeah, well, if you gotta, you gotta. I'll get started on this

end. Maybe by the time you get back I'll have found him."

"Just remember one thing, Rocky. When you find him, he's half mine."

It took Rocky a long time to fall asleep. The situation was frustrating, but it could have been worse. He was still stuck with Henry, but it should be easier to find the thief with two of them searching.

Henry must have started before dawn, for by the time Rocky got dressed and outside, his car was gone. Good. That would bring him back sooner. He fortified himself with a huge indigestible breakfast, not from choice but because once he picked up the trail he wouldn't want to lose time eating.

The office of The Waiting Room was not yet open, so Rocky decided to wait by his cat's grave. He wondered who would refill it now that the old man had gone. Maybe Mr. Owens himself would have to do it. He smiled at the thought as he rounded the bend. To his surprise, someone was already at work on it, but it wasn't Mr. Owens.

"What are you doing here?" Rocky said.

The gravedigger looked up. "I work here, remember?"

"But, you're gone!"

"Do I look gone?" He straightened his back and groaned. "I'm

getting mighty tired of burying this damn cat. After what I did for him, the least he could have done was fill it in himself."

"Who? What did you do? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about last night, of course."

"That's what I'd like to talk about! Where's my money?"

The old man dropped his shovel. "I don't think we're talking the same language. Park it and let's do the bookkeeping." He sat down on the grass.

Rocky pulled the note from his pocket and sat beside him. "This note says you took my money," he said.

The old man read it. "I didn't write this."

Rocky stared at him. "You didn't? Then who did?"

"That rat! He tried to blame me!"

Rocky's head started to spin. His blood pressure must be dropping. But it should be rising. "What rat?"

"That brother of yours."

"I don't have a brother."

"I might have known. He don't look like you at all. But he had the same mother who had the same cat dishes buried in that same casket."

Henry! He must have been eavesdropping yesterday when he was supposed to be in town. No wonder he hadn't asked Rocky last night what kind of

story he had given the gravedigger that the old man hadn't believed. If Rocky hadn't been so upset, he would have noticed that.

"See, I was hanging around here ever since dark last night. I figured you'd come early and try to gyp me out of the money you promised."

"You didn't trust me?"

"Why should I? And sure enough, you did show early, only it wasn't you, but the other guy. He told me he was your brother, and he said you had sent him to get the dishes because you didn't feel good." He snorted. "As if I believed that story about the dishes! I never heard such rot. I figured there was a lot more than dishes in that box, and I aimed to get my share. So I told him either he pays up or I report him."

"He don't scare easy. Besides, he's bigger than you."

"Digging ain't all I can do with a shovel."

"So you let him take the money."

"Yeah, minus my share. But like you said, it's the easiest money I ever made."

"That don't sound like Henry. He should have known you might tell me and then I'd go after him again."

"I told him I was going to the

Bahamas to live with my daughter."

"I didn't know you had a daughter."

The old man grinned. "You ain't the only one who knows how to make up a story."

Rocky got to his feet. "Well, I guess you did earn it. Have a good life."

He trudged back to the motel. Henry and the money were well on their way by now. Sure, he had found a store to rent. And sure, he was going home for books. And sure, he had a headache last night. What a sneak!

He started to pack his bag. There was nothing to keep him here now. He might as well get going. But where? He no longer had his retirement fund. Where could he go with no money? He raised his eyes to the mirror above the dresser. Faded, fat, and fifty-four. Downhill all the way. But Henry was practically fixed for life.

He made a last-minute check of the room; nothing left that belonged to him, either here or anywhere.

Except that money.

He closed the door softly and got behind the wheel of his car. Downhill, but only if he headed in that direction.

He turned on the radio and began to hum. "Here I come, creep!"

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

David Edgerley Gates



At a distance they were no more than figures in a landscape. Even through the low-powered field glasses, the heat coming up off the cracked hardpan made their image wobbly. When they got close enough, Caleb Case could see it was a woman on horseback and a man on foot, the man leading the horse. The animal looked more beaten down than the two people.

Caleb handed the glasses to his brother; and Ben squinted through them. "The horse might spook, we fired a rifle over their heads," Ben Case said.

Caleb hawked dust out of his throat and spat it on the ground. "Damn horse would probably just cave in anyway," he said disgustedly. "Hardly seems worth it."

"It's a hundred miles of desert between here and the Rio Grande," Ben reminded him.

The country was desolate and forbidding, no two ways about it. Sand and rock along the valley floor, every now and again a yucca with stiff, speared leaves, standing alone in the waste. When the sun was high, it got hot enough to break stones, but up on the ridges of the sierra there was a mantle of snow, and it was so cold at night your skin split across the knuckles when you closed your hand. You had to remember to shake your boots

out first thing in the morning in case a snake or scorpion had crawled inside for warmth.

"Bad place to leave a woman afoot," Ben remarked. "Did you mean to shoot her?"

"I've never shot a woman, Ben," Caleb said.

"Known some that needed it, though, I bet," Ben said.

They came down out of the rocks where they'd been forted up and made their way across the scrubby terrain. The man stopped walking and pulled the horse up when he saw them coming toward him.

"Slung your rifle," Caleb suggested. "No point in scaring them to death."

"Uniforms'll do that for us," Ben said.

He had a point. People in these parts were suspicious of soldiers, American or not, and some of the Mexican government's troops were no better than bandits. Ben slung his weapon, though, muzzle down, and so did Caleb, although he let his hand rest on the holster hooked to his web belt. The flap was undone and the .45 automatic was cocked. It didn't pay to be careless, not with a damn war on.

They'd deserted a week before. The year was 1916. Black Jack Pershing had moved into Mexico in March, and now it was late September. Pershing's

troops had been hunting Villa for six months, in revenge for a cross-border raid on Columbus, New Mexico. The expeditionary force had been duly authorized by President Wilson, and Villa was to be taken dead or alive, but Mexico had a dim view of Wilson's authority. After six years of civil war, the American incursion was widely resented.

Coming closer, Caleb saw the man was a gringo, but the woman sitting the tired horse looked Indian, maybe an Apache. She wore a lot of silver and sat astride.

"Howdy," Caleb said. "You folks look a little bit less lost than we are."

The man nodded warily but said nothing.

"There isn't much in back of us," Caleb said. "Is there some kind of town up ahead?"

"Place called Esperanza," the man said. "About fifteen miles north." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

Caleb grinned. "Well, there's hope yet," he said. He had enough Spanish to know Esperanza meant Hope.

"You boys chasing Pancho Villa?" the man asked him.

"That's what they tell us," Caleb said. "We haven't cut any sign, let alone caught sight of him."

"Make sure he doesn't catch sight of you," the man said.

"Thank you for the advice," Caleb said.

Caleb saw the woman make some kind of movement, out of the corner of his eye, reaching behind her skirt. The crack of the Springfield then, when Ben shot her, was enormously loud, even in that empty place. The horse shied. The woman slithered off it bonelessly.

"Well, what the hell?" Caleb said, astonished. At the same time he heard the bolt work on the Springfield, and the man in front of him drew a gun, an old single-action. He cocked the hammer as he raised it with both hands, and Caleb pulled his .45 and shot the man twice in the chest at a range of no more than four feet. The man staggered back and threw his arms out and lost his footing. He went down hard, and final.

Ben caught the reins of the horse.

"Jesus," Caleb said. He went over and looked at the man he'd just shot. The man was still breathing, but blood was rattling in his lungs. His hat had come off, and his face was freckled and pale where the brim had blocked the sun. He stared up at Caleb, stunned and aggrieved.

"She was fixing to shoot one of us, or both," Ben said, coming up behind him. "I saw her reaching for it."

Caleb looked over at her. The

.30-06 had caught the Indian woman in the throat and come out through the base of her skull. She'd been dead when she hit the ground. She lay there with her head in a puddle of brains, and the sack of makings, loose tobacco and cigarette papers, had spilled out of her hand.

"Goddamn it to hell," Caleb said.

He knelt down next to the man lying on the ground and picked up his hat. He set it on the man's forehead to shade his eyes. The man's shirtfront was soaked with blood. He wouldn't last long.

Ben's shadow fell across them.

Caleb stood up and looked at his brother. He holstered the .45 pistol.

Ben shrugged. "We were going to take the horse anyway," he said.

"I'd have sooner not hanged for it," Caleb said.

"They'll hang us if they catch us," Ben pointed out.

"If they don't shoot us first," Caleb said.

The dying man on the ground coughed wetly.

Caleb crouched down again. He went through the man's pockets as gently as he could. He found a large wallet with some folding money, pretty much worthless. There was a good biscuit watch on a chain.

And there was a money belt. He had to shift the man's weight to get the money belt off, and the man groaned when he did it. The belt was heavy. Caleb stood up and handed the watch and wallet to Ben to hold while he fished through the money belt. The weight was gold coin, Mexican double eagles, and it amounted to more than a hundred dollars American.

"Son of a bitch," Ben said, pleased and surprised.

But the other thing Caleb found in the money belt was a packet of letters, which meant a responsibility.

"Goddamn it to hell," he said again, and looked down at the man on the ground. The man's eyes were already glazed.

"Leave it," Ben told him. "It's nothing to us."

Caleb shoved the letters in his tunic and hitched the money belt over his shoulder. "You going to strip the woman of her silver?" he asked his brother.

"Well, it's not going to do her any good," Ben said.

The two Case brothers had been quartered in Chihuahua, the provincial capital. It was slack duty, but Ben beat up a sergeant one night, in a quarrel over a whore. Ben had sat on the man's chest and struck him repeatedly in the face with a brass candlestick until he'd

been dragged off by his brother Caleb. Ben was headed for the stockade if the sergeant recovered, and worse if he didn't. They bolted that same night. Caleb was the older brother by two years. He felt it was his charge to look after Ben. He would have been better advised to let Ben rot in jail or even let him hang, but he couldn't allow that. They took two horses, good army mounts, and rode for the border, figuring on pursuit. The horses foundered the fourth day, and the Case brothers were on foot in the desert. It was a bad piece of luck, but just as bad for anybody they came across. They'd killed for a horse.

They rode the stolen horse double until it gave out under them a few miles short of Esperanza, and they stumbled into the town late that afternoon. They weren't too sure of their welcome.

The little central plaza was deserted. There was the usual sleepy cantina off the square, and Caleb went in. Ben followed him. It took their eyes a minute to adjust from the blazing heat and light of the day to the sweaty coolness of the cantina. Dark eyes watched them from the shadows, silent and hostile, and it felt prickly, like a static charge.

Caleb slapped some coins on the bar. "Beer," he croaked to

the bartender. "*Cerveza, por favor.*"

The air was sluggish and thick. Nothing stirred.

The bartender fished two brown bottles out of a zinc tub with an inch of water in the bottom and put them on the bar.

Caleb unsnapped the ceramic cap and had a pull. The cap clicked against the neck of the bottle. The beer was salty and lukewarm, but it was wet. He gulped it down, swallowing the sudden gassy lump in his throat. It made him sneeze. He wiped his face on his dirty sleeve.

"We need horses," he told the bartender. "*Caballos.* To rejoin our outfit."

The bartender regarded him with a blank gaze.

"We can pay," Caleb said. "*Dinero.* Not your U.S. army scrip, either. Cash money."

"Watch what you say," Ben murmured beside him. "These people would cut our throats for a dime."

"You're one to talk," Caleb said. He looked at the bartender again and tapped the bar with one of the pesos the bartender hadn't picked up. "*Caballos,*" he repeated. "*Dónde está?* Is there a stable, a corral?"

It was the same word in both languages. The bartender gestured with his towel and said something in Spanish that Ca-

leb didn't catch. Nobody else in the cantina said a word.

"Thanks for your trouble," Caleb said. "*Gracias.*"

"*De nada,*" the bartender said.

"Nothing is right," Ben muttered sarcastically.

"Come on," Caleb said. He left the loose change on the bar and headed for the door.

Ben didn't linger.

They walked up the street in the dust and the heat. The town seemed empty, but maybe it was the time of day. Nobody seemed to take much interest in the two Yankee soldiers. The stable, when they found it, was no more than a shed with a split-rail fence next to it, and the few horses in the remuda looked spavined and hangdog, defeated by the climate in general, or poor treatment.

"Not much of a selection," Ben commented.

"Beggars can't be choosers," his brother said.

They struck a deal for horses and tack. Caleb paid three of the double eagles.

"You're mighty free with that money," Ben said.

"Would you rather spend it in a whorehouse?" Caleb asked him. "We're both of us one step ahead of the hangman."

"We might better spend it on some store-bought clothes," Ben said. "We can't cross the border in these uniforms."

That was true enough, but Caleb was more concerned with whoever might be behind them. He wanted to put some distance between. What they were going to run into down the road was of less importance. You took things as they came, and so far none of it had been good. He mounted, pulled the horse's head around, and dug his heels into the animal's flanks. The horse cantered forward into the gathering dark.

It was all simpler than it seemed, when you came down to it. On the outskirts of Juarez Caleb slipped into town while Ben held the horses in a *barranca*. Caleb bought them new stiff pants and a couple of cheap shirts, whose colors would run the first time they were washed, but good boots and felt hats that would keep their shape and a couple of sheepskin coats. They crossed the river into El Paso without incident and rode north up the Rio Grande on into New Mexico, the collars of their new shirts chafing. They stopped in a town called Las Cruces for a bath and a haircut and a barber shave and a long, deep breath because they'd gotten away with it. Caleb couldn't quite believe it, but Ben was almighty full of himself. The fact was that they were broke. The money that had fallen in

their laps down in Mexico was gone, spent on their escape. Ben argued for more of the same when they got on the train; headed farther north.

"What did you get for the horses? Ten dollars apiece? Even a Mexican horse is worth more than that. We got dealt a damn poor hand."

"We were lucky, Ben," Caleb said.

"You make your own luck," Ben told him.

Maybe that was so. Caleb didn't entirely believe it. He thought much of it was accident. He'd had the chance to read most of the letters in the packet he'd taken from the dead man, letters written by the dead man's sister, from some town in Texas. San Angelo, sheep country. He composed a telegram to her, painfully, and sent it from a whistle stop outside of Elephant Butte.

REGRET TO INFORM YOU
YOUR BROTHER DEAD IN
MEXICO OF BANDIT ATTACK.
DETAILS SKETCHY.
MEXICAN AUTHORITIES
LACK CONTROL. REST
ASSURED YOUR BROTHER
DID NOT SUFFER BUT DIED
SUDDENLY. WILL FORWARD
YOUR LETTERS.

He signed it, after some thought, SSGT C CASE USA, RET.

He deserved the jump in rank, he decided, and calling himself retired was a nice touch. It described his situation pretty well. Ben had seen to that.

"Where do we go from here?" Ben asked him, standing on the empty platform in Santa Fe. It was late evening, and the pueblo was already going dark. They were down to a few odd dollars in silver and the dead man's biscuit watch, which was worth probably the price of a meal if it wasn't too dear.

"We'll find a room for the night, we've got enough for that," Caleb said. "Push on in the morning."

"We need some kind of plan, Caleb," Ben said. "We can't just bounce from pillar to post."

"I wish you'd thought of that before you started cracking that mick sergeant's head," Caleb said.

"You didn't have to come along," Ben told him.

"No, but I'm stuck with you now," Caleb said.

They stole four horses from a livery on the edge of town. It was early morning, the wind blowing in cold off the mesa and the ground crunchy underfoot. None of the horses was much good, but it was the best they could do. They saddled all four. Caleb took the stableboy into one of the empty stalls at the

point of a gun and tied him up. He was mounted when his brother came out of the stall, buttoning the front of his fly up.

"You didn't have to do that out of meanness," Caleb said to him. "The kid's probably wet his own pants already."

"He did when I stuck the knife in him," Ben said.

They had an hour's head start, at most.

They came into Ojo Caliente at the end of the day, after a forty mile ride. Ben wanted to go to a saloon, but Caleb kept him in the boardinghouse. Caleb flirted with the grass widow who owned the place, and Ben sulked.

"We're on the run from the law, and you're off chasing skirt," he said angrily when they were getting into their lumpy beds on the third floor.

"I wasn't chasing skirt," Caleb said mildly.

"What do you call what you were up to downstairs?"

"Good manners," Caleb said.

The bank in Ojo Caliente was big enough to rob and small enough to take, just the two of them, and they did. Caleb had advised Ben it would be simpler and easier if they didn't kill anyone, and they got away without firing a shot. They skirted the foothills of the San Juan Mountains with a posse in pursuit. The posse was using automo-

biles, two cars full of armed men, and they should have been able to run them down, or out-flank them anyway, but the Case brothers took to the broken ground on horseback, and the posse had to give up the chase when they ran out of road. They sent back for horses but had missed their chance. Home in Ojo Caliente, they alerted the law in four states.

Caleb and Ben crossed the Colorado line three days later and came down out of the hills into Durango.

The woman who hired Placido Geist was named Erma Rantoul; she had a ranch south of San Angelo, Texas, where she raised merino sheep. Her brother Ted had gone to Mexico in search of dinosaur bones. Erma wanted to know how he'd died, and she could afford to find out.

"With all due respect, ma'am, I think you're beating a dead horse," Placido Geist told her. "Present circumstances in Mexico are unsettled."

"I don't doubt the local authorities are corrupt," she said. "Nor do I imagine the War Department would drop everything to humor me. I'm sure General Pershing has his hands full. Will you accept the job?"

"I'm reluctant to take your money when there's so little

chance of success," he said. "It's an uncertain world, and your brother had the bad luck to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. I know it sounds harsh, but leave it at that."

"I'm not willing to leave it at that," Erma Rantoul told him. "My brother was probably foolish, and he may have died a fool's death, but I'd like to know one way or the other. If you were to contact this sergeant, this man Case, he might shed some light on the matter."

"Pershing's boys are beating the bushes trying to flush Villa," he said. "It doesn't make my job any easier."

Erma Rantoul regarded him unblinkingly. "I didn't think the job would be easy," she said. "Were that the case, I'd have settled for an easier man. I know you find me quixotic, perhaps even wrongheaded, but I am no less determined."

"I'll have grounds more relative than this," Placido Geist said, smiling.

"You know your Shakespeare, then?" she inquired.

"Only the tragedies," he told her. "And a few of the historical plays. I find the comedies too contrived, or just too damn silly for my taste."

She watched him with a basilisk's stare. "To die, to sleep," she said, "'to sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in

that sleep of death what dreams may come . . . must give us pause.'"

"Does your brother's death give you bad dreams?"

"Not his, nor the fear of my own," she said.

He nodded. "Nor mine."

Placido Geist was as hard as they come. He'd been an Indian fighter and a buffalo skinner and a bounty hunter for the railroads. He was at this time past sixty years old, short and stout, but he could still sit a saddle for days on end. He decided to take Miss Rantoul's money with the understanding that if he came up dry in a month's time she would agree to let it drop. He outfitted himself and by the end of the week rode across the Sierra Mulato into Mexico.

In the meantime, the Case brothers stuck up another bank, the Gila Savings & Loan, in a small town west of Durango called Hesperus. They were better mounted now. They'd bought good horses in Durango. But the men chasing them this time were as well mounted and knew the country better. They telegraphed to Farmington and Shiprock, Black Mesa and Bluff, and the Navajo Reservation police. Caleb and Ben shot their way out of an ambush near Four Corners and left three dead.

They traveled southwest

through the Painted Desert and over the Mogollon Rim, down into the Superstition Mountains in Arizona north of Tucson. They were getting a reputation. The descriptions from Ojo Caliente matched the descriptions in Hesperus, but the trail had gone cold, over a week. They could afford to lie low.

"What about California?" Ben asked him. "Get on a train in Phoenix, we'd be long gone."

Caleb nodded. "Could make a new life out there, I hear. Call yourself anything you like."

"Need more of a grubstake than we've got," Ben said.

"We have to watch our step, Ben," Caleb said. "We've outrun the army and two posses so far, and I'd say our luck was holding. We could wear out our welcome pretty quick, we don't consider the consequences of what we do. A bank job is out of the question for the time being."

They'd made camp in a draw along the Salt River and felt safe enough to build a fire, so they weren't eating cold beans and hardtack.

"You don't object, we go into town, maybe take a bath? Get a woman, even, or a bottle of whisky. Change our socks. They're not looking for us down here."

"Not yet they aren't," Caleb said.

"Well, then," Ben said, smiling. "No harm in it."

Caleb should have known better when Ben was concerned, but he went along with it. They broke camp, and the two of them rode down into Queen Creek. There'd been placer mining there once, but now it was just another dusty settlement the miners had left behind. It was only big enough to support the one saloon, and didn't even have a real whorehouse, but a girl in the bar took Ben's silver and led him upstairs. She was fat and pretty and probably younger than she looked. In his experience, Caleb reflected, they were either too young or too old. The life wore them out fast, but what did you expect? He didn't expect Ben to tie her wrists and ankles to the bedstead, gag her with her own chemise, and then beat her to death with his belt.

Placido Geist interviewed the tired army captain in a pueblo called Colonia Delicias, where the Americans were breaking horses. The captain was bunked in an adobe hut with a roof of straw, laid over peeled poles. His men slept in the open.

"Caleb Case was a good soldier," the captain said.

"He deserted, though. Was that his brother's doing?"

"Ben Case is a bad apple."

"From what you say, he should have hung," Placido Geist suggested.

"Should've," the captain agreed wearily.

"Maybe he will yet."

"I wouldn't count on it," the captain said. "It's not a rule that the bad die young, if at all."

"I didn't," Placido Geist said.

The captain dredged up an exhausted smile. "Maybe you were never young," he said.

It was clear that the U.S. Army had neither the men nor the ambition to chase down Ben and Caleb Case. Placido Geist didn't much blame them. The two brothers were bound to come to a bad end sooner or later, and it didn't matter whether Placido Geist caught up with them first. His only concern in finding Caleb Case was to ask him about Ted Rantoul. There was the small matter of how Caleb had signed his telegram, as he'd never made it higher than corporal, but maybe you could put that off to vanity, like a bantam rooster strutting and puffing up his feathers. Placido Geist had been something of a bantam rooster himself in his time.

The captain offered him a place for the night. The old bounty hunter thanked the cap-

tain for his politeness but told him he'd just as soon push on.

He trailed north, up the west branch of the Conchos to where it branched again, at the River Carmen, through Gallego and Moctezuma, Rancho Nuevo and Candelaria. He cut no sign of the Case brothers although there was sign aplenty of bandit activity and renegades both gringo and Mexican. Most of northern Mexico seemed to be alive with freebooters, but he managed to avoid contact with them. Once in a while some bunch or another raised enough dust for him to decide to seek cover, if there was cover to be had, or he'd simply angle away from the river into the unforgiving desert country to the east. He knew a man traveling alone was as good as buzzard bait if he fell in with the wrong company.

He was circling back toward the river again, along what might have once been a herding trail through the foothills of the Sierra de la Encarnation, when he found two bodies, or what was left of them. They'd been pretty well picked over by the lizards and ants after the birds and coyotes were done with them, and what flesh was still stuck to their bones was dessicated and leathery. From the ragged clothes he figured the man, at least, had been white. He could only guess that the

other one was a woman because of what looked like hair and maybe a skirt. He scraped a kind of pocket in the alkali, shoveled the bones into it, and covered them up as best he could. He hoped somebody might do the same for him, one of these days.

He spent that night in a town called Esperanza, turning his tired horse out into a corral with some sorry specimens that wouldn't bring ten dollars in El Paso, the stable only a shed for storing straw and the farrier friendly but witless. He'd brought his own grain, fed his animal carefully, saw her watered, and waited outside the split-rail fence to see the horses wouldn't nip each other, but the local horses didn't have the energy to quarrel. Then he stumped up the street to the cantina, where he'd rented one of the two rooms above the bar. The bedding was probably full of lice.

Placido Geist had a German father and a Mexican mother. He'd been born in Dry Devils in South Texas when the country was still contested and the fight for the Alamo a living memory. He wasn't a man of amiable cast, but neither was he a forbidding presence, and he spoke the Spanish of the border with an easy, familiar fluency. He treated the innkeeper with

grave courtesy, and after dinner he allowed himself to be approached and agreed to join a game of dominoes in the courtyard. He put the same questions he'd put in towns to the south, but circumspectly, as if the answers were of little importance, and eventually teased out the whisper of some gringos in uniform who'd come into Esperanza on foot and bought horses with gold, then ridden north. They'd been speculated about but no conclusions drawn.

It was only the merest glimmer, but it was the first Placido Geist had happened on between Chihuahua and the U.S. border. He betrayed no undue interest, and the gossip turned to the other crazy gringo, traveling with the Apache woman.

In the bad old days, a pair of desperadoes like Ben and Caleb Case could have stayed one jump ahead of the law for quite a while if they kept on the move, but with the long distance telegraph lines and the railroad, and more scientific methods of investigation, time was against them. They'd made a big mistake after Queen Creek when they hit a freight office in Coolidge. It was a small way station on the Union Pacific trunk line where through trains only stopped on signal and they got away with damn

little to show for it, but the robbery put the Pinkertons on their trail. The railroad detectives were a determined lot, with both property and a reputation to protect, and now the Case brothers were hunted men. There were printed handbills, giving a rough outline of their progress—New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona—and they were variously described as horse thieves and murderers, robbing banks by preference but known for other depredations. One connection that hadn't been made was between the murder of an ostler in Santa Fe and the savage killing of a whore in Queen Creek. These deaths were marginal, after all. What mattered were crimes against capital. The reward posted for their capture was ten thousand dollars, one or both, dead or alive.

The noose tightening, Ben and Caleb rode east along the Gila River and then south into the Chiricahua badlands. They stayed a night in Turkey Flat, and attempted to cross the mountains at Apache Pass, but Ben's horse pulled up lame short of Dos Cabezas. They limped into the town toward dusk. The flat light on the sandstone turned the rocks salmon, and then it went dark.

"This is a fair goddamn pickle," Ben remarked.

Caleb dismounted. "I want

you to give me your word on something, Ben," he said. "It's in your own interest, and mine, that we don't make trouble here. Let's see if we can't get through the evening without it."

"Anything you say."

"You'll follow my example?"

Ben got off the bruised horse. "Haven't I always?" he asked, grinning at his brother across the saddle.

"Not that I've noticed," Caleb said shortly. He caught up the trailing leads and tugged the horses after him.

"I don't know why you're so out of sorts," Ben remarked, following along.

"Goddamn it," Caleb said. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't kill somebody just for the look on their face when they died. Is that plain enough?"

"It's plain," Ben said, sulking behind.

"Look," Caleb said. "What's done is done. There's no help for it, and I don't fault you, but we've left a trail a one-legged man could follow. We have to lie low and bide our time; drift south to Tombstone or Douglas, steer clear of fancy women and stay out of banks. We don't, it'll lead them right to us."

"That's good advice, brother," Ben said. "I'll watch my manners." He smiled mischievously.

Caleb stopped short and swung around. The horses

snorted and shied, sensing his anger. He jerked at the reins to make them stand. "You'll do better than that, Ben," he said, his voice tight with fury, his hand on the holstered .45 pistol. "We'd be dead men either way."

"Well, damn," Ben said, utterly surprised.

"You walk the straight and narrow, Ben," Caleb said, "or by God, I just might kill you and be done with it."

"There's no need of this." Ben took a couple of steps forward and caught the bridle of the near horse, the bay gelding that had gone lame. He stroked it soothingly under the jaw. "You backed me up," he said to his brother. "I'm beholden for that. You did it, and you didn't have to. I got you into this, so I guess it's up to me to see we get out of it."

"Hell," Caleb said. He felt ashamed of himself, even though he knew he was in the right. "Let's stable the horses and find ourselves some decent whisky."

That night it was Caleb who got drunk and Ben who put him to bed, Ben who watched his brother's troubled sleep, his fevered turning in the bed-clothes, Ben who stayed awake into the early morning hours, sitting in the ladderback rocking chair with a figured quilt in his

lap and the shotgun across his knees, facing the door.

Placido Geist quartered north by east along the Rio Grande and crossed the river at Guadalupe Bravos. On the Texas side of the river he was able to arrange passage for himself and his mount, and they traveled the last thirty miles to El Paso by rail. He could have changed trains and kept going. The telegram to Erma Rantoul had been sent from Elephant Butte, a short distance up the Santa Fe line, but there was more than one way to skin a cat, Placido Geist decided. He didn't feel now that he'd been sent on such a fool's errand, and in fact he was next to certain that Caleb Case and his brother Ben had murdered Ted Rantoul, not even knowing his name, and then robbed him of his money and possibles. The bones Placido Geist had buried near Esperanza could have been anyone's, but the coincidence was too near: Ted Rantoul had left Esperanza one morning with an Indian woman, headed south, and the two Yankee deserters had come into Esperanza from the south late the same day with heavy pockets. Still, there remained the curious fact of the telegram. Why had Caleb notified the dead man's sister? If

he'd left well enough alone, she would have been none the wiser.

Placido Geist had plenty of chips to cash in from his days with the army and the railroad. He paid some calls—the city constable's office and the county sheriff, two retired town marshals. He rode the streetcar out to Fort Bliss and spoke politely to an impatient lieutenant after having been kept waiting for half an hour. He had a long conversation with a baggagemaster at the Union Pacific and explained himself yet again to a senior Pinkerton's man.

Their office was on South Dyer, near the terminal. The Pinkerton's man was a tired, grey-faced gent in a too-tight suit named Rabb. His eyes glittered at the mention of Caleb and Ben Case, like raisins in a suet pudding. Placido Geist figured Rabb was after the reward but didn't mean to work for it, and chose not to trust him.

Rabb spelled out some of the details Placido Geist knew already, as if asking him for confirmation, but it was soon obvious the old bounty hunter had nothing to add, and the railroad detective felt taken advantage of. He managed to check his anger. Placido Geist was a man of some reputation. "Bread upon the waters, sir," Rabb murmured.

Placido Geist nodded and got

to his feet. Rabb might well be a rival, but there was no need to make him an enemy. "I'll let you know if I hear anything," he said.

They shook hands across the desk, the Pinkerton's man clearly undeceived by the show of friendliness. It was also clear he thought Placido Geist overrated, ready to be put out to pasture, and his smile was patronizing.

Placido Geist sent a few dozen wires from the telegraph office, giving a return address in care of Joshua Spengler, a former deputy marshal, to add some authority. Spengler was an old acquaintance, now pensioned off, crippled in body but still agile of mind. The two of them studied the map.

"From what you say, those railroad dicks didn't get interested until after your boys hit that Union Pacific freight depot," Spengler commented. "The rest is guesswork."

"It's a lot of ground to cover," Placido Geist admitted. "Three hundred miles between Coolidge and Four Corners."

"Assuming it's them," Spengler said. "The back trail. The bank in Colorado, and before that the one north of Santa Fe, Ojo Caliente."

"I wouldn't swear to it," Placido Geist said, "but it feels right. They took a train out of Las Cruces and sent the tele-

gram from Elephant Butte. They must have gotten off in Albuquerque or Santa Fe. Where did they get the horses to outrun the Ojo Caliente posse?"

The answer came the next day from Santa Fe, one of the jurisdictions Placido Geist had wired, inquiring after recent crimes. Of the crimes reported or discovered in that period of time, one was the murder and mutilation of a stableboy and the theft of four horses.

"You see their handiwork in this?" Spengler asked him.

"Caleb Case is a decent man gone bad," Placido Geist remarked, "and his brother Ben's a bad man gone worse."

"It was Caleb who sent the telegram to Miss Rantoul," Spengler said. "That may mark him as halfway decent, but it was a foolhardy gesture."

Placido Geist was bent over the map again, running his eye south and tracing a line with his stubby index finger. "They've made a circle," he said. "Instead of heading up to high country, they've turned back, as if to cross into Mexico again." He was thoughtful for a moment. "Caleb sent that wire to Miss Rantoul, but he never sent her letters back the way he promised."

"Thus conscience does make cowards of us all," Joshua Spengler remarked. "Shakespeare."

"I don't think it's his conscience that's bothering him, or cold feet, either," Placido Geist said.

He sent a wire to Erma Rantoul that afternoon.

YOUR BROTHER DEAD IN MEXICO, OF THAT NO QUESTION. CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS DEATH REMAIN CLOUD-ED. SGT CASE AN IMPOSTOR AND POSSIBLE SUSPECT IN THE MURDER. I AM IN PUR-SUIT.

Ben had shown no interest in the letters from the first, had in fact urged his brother to get rid of them, but Caleb fixed on them in a way that seemed sentimental to Ben, almost unhealthy. They certainly wouldn't bring the dead man back to life. He said as much, and Caleb rounded on him, so Ben left it alone after that. He wasn't in the best of sorts himself after the sleepless night in Dos Cabezas, and Caleb was surly and hung over the next day. They had to wait for the horse. The bay gelding had picked up a stone, and the frog was still tender. Ben didn't want a mount he had to favor, but there was no point in trading a good animal for some swayback. The remuda at the livery was mangy and ill-assort-

ed. They spent a second night, keeping each other poor company, both of them sober and out of sorts. Caleb forbade Ben a woman.

They pulled out the next morning with neither of their tempers improved. They rode the horses hard, sawing at the bits, Caleb in the lead. He struck south along the ridges of the Chiricahua instead of east through the pass. Ben knew better than to ask. Nightfall found them camped near Big Hatchet, less than a day's ride from Douglas and the Mexican border. Caleb was still broody. Ben fed the fire. The wood was greasy and green, and the fire smoked, spitting pitch.

"All right," Ben said finally. "What's in Mexico?"

"Less damn law," Caleb said.

"What about the army?"

"They're in Chihuahua, not Sonora."

"We'd be jumping from the frying pan into the fire, you ask me," Ben said.

"You don't have to come along," Caleb told him.

"That's a hell of a thing to say."

"You've played on my better nature all my life, Ben," his brother said. "It's time I took charge of what I want to do and where I want to go."

"You've always been in charge," Ben said, puzzled.

Caleb looked at him across the fire. "I guess that's how it looks to you," he said. "But the plain fact is, it's always been your party. I'm the one who's responsible for you, so you've never had to take responsibility for yourself, and I end up holding the damn bag."

Ben took a deep breath and let it out. "I see what you mean," he said, chastened. "I'll make it up to you."

"You don't have to make it up to me, Ben," Caleb said. "Just do the best you can."

They humped up in their bedrolls on the rocky ground. Caleb stretched and settled, like a cat, and dozed off. Ben lay awake, looking up at the stars. His breath condensed and evaporated overhead. I can look after myself, he thought.

Placido Geist traveled west by train, a local that took him through Deming and Lordsburg, across the state line and over the mountains, down into Cochise and Dragoon. He switched away from the main route and took a spur line south, stopping off in Tombstone and Bisbee, but the telegrams waiting for him told of a cold scent, and the lawmen he spoke with were helpful enough, even friendly, but they had no burning interest in the Case brothers.

The tracks were blocked at the border. Placido Geist unshipped his horse and rode across to Agua Prieta. It was the twenty-third of November. He reported to the commandant of Rurales at a barracks off the square and found the man indifferent but not openly hostile. They discussed the terms of his bribe over coffee and anisette and came to an understanding. The commandant agreed to give Placido Geist access to the telegraph office, and to share what information might be had, in return for credit in the event of a capture and a significant piece of the reward posted by the Union Pacific. There was a small matter of earnest money changing hands, and they parted in good humor.

He stabled his horse, took a room in one of the hotels, and had a bath. Afterwards he sat in the breeze from the window and smoked a cigar, thinking. He was waiting for the Case brothers to do something foolish, and he was confident they'd oblige, but Placido Geist didn't like reacting to what outlaws might do. He felt it gave them the upper hand.

Evening drew on, the long silvery dusk going suddenly dark. He closed the window. The days were still warm, but shorter as they tended toward the solstice, and the nights were cold. He

trimmed a lamp and lit it. The electricity in Agua Prieta was unreliable. The guerrillas had blown up the power station twice during the last year, and it was still undergoing repairs. He sat at the oak secretary and studied the map again in the wavering light from the kerosene wick. Caleb and Ben Case had been driven by necessity or accident, Placido Geist knew, but there was a riddle in it somewhere. He wondered if it had to do with the necessary or accidental killing of Ted Rantoul.

He telegraphed the dead man's sister again in the morning, couching his question circumspectly, since the commander of police would certainly be reading their messages.

YOUR BROTHER IN SEARCH
OF FOSSILS AND OTHER
ARTIFACTS. DID YOU
ENCOURAGE HIM? DID HE
INTIMATE DISCOVERY OF
BONES OR ANY MATERIAL
OF INTEREST TO SCIENCE?

He couldn't come right out and ask Erma Rantoul if her brother Ted were a graverobber, but he hoped she could read between the lines. Ted Rantoul had covered a good part of northern Chihuahua province. It was the presence of the Indian woman that intrigued

Placido Geist. He didn't think she was there just to warm the blankets at night.

He went to the livery stable and checked his horse and tack. He figured the ostler for a police informer and paid him on the spot for another three days' board. He knew he was being watched and didn't want the commandant too suspicious of his movements. It was nearly noon. He walked back to his hotel and made a late breakfast of steak and eggs, the meat bloody and the eggs slippery on his plate, and then went out onto the verandah to sit, picking his teeth. Agua Prieta was no sleepy backwater, but a fair-sized town, commercially respectable. He put his feet up on the railing and watched the traffic in the street, foot and horse, wagons and even a few automobiles. The pace slackened as the sun stood higher, and slowly the streets grew less peopled. It was siesta time. Placido Geist slumped in his chair, dozing comfortably.

He woke up with a guilty start. The shadows were long, and the desk clerk coughed again behind his hand. A boy from the telegraph office stood by the porch railing. Placido Geist thanked them both and tipped the boy, and read the wire Erma Rantoul had sent him.

Her reply was indirect.

THERE IS NO EL DORADO.
HE SPOKE ONLY OF THE
UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY,
WHERE THE PAST IS BURIED.

The Undiscovered Country, Placido Geist thought to himself, folding the telegram. *La Tierra de los Muertos*. He cocked his heels on the porch railing again, tipping his hat forward over his eyes, and gave every evidence of unhurried languor. It was reported back to the commandant that the telegraph message from the *gringa* could not have been so important, after all.

Ben and Caleb Case crossed into Mexico west of Coronado and traversed the Sonoran Highlands. It took them the best part of three days to reach Pílares de Nacozari, the country being so rough. They moved south along the dry riverbed and west over the Sierra Madre, striking for Mata Ortiz in the lower foothills where the muddy waters of the San Miguel dribbled out into sandy shale. They were fairly sure the American forces were well away from them, beyond the Santa Clara, but they weren't so sure of Páncho Villa. They'd gotten rid of their uniforms long since, but Villa had been known to offer

amnesty and safe passage to troops deserting Pershing, and he was likely to shoot a pair of plain Yankee adventurers.

Caleb had taken Ben into his confidence and shown him the letters. In her careful school-girl's hand, Erma Rantoul had written her brother to congratulate him on his find. She tempered her enthusiasm with a skeptic's caution, but on the whole she'd kept her doubts to herself and wished him good luck and a safe return. It was her reference to treasures that had caught Caleb's eye, and he pointed it out to Ben with no little satisfaction. Ben seized on the notion with greedy excitement. He remembered the gold in the dead man's money belt and talked of Cortez and his *conquistadores*, the riches taken out of the mountains with slave labor, the mule trains bound for the coast, the great wealth of the New World taking ship to Spain, three centuries before.

"Forgotten," Ben insisted, his eyes feverish. "Nobody knows. It's just stories, like the Lost Dutchman Mine. That damn Apache woman he had with him. She led him there. It's ours for the picking now."

"There's no hurry, then," Caleb said. "We should travel at night, hole up during the day, at least until we get past the railway and the river. There's no

sense exposing ourselves. Whatever's waiting there, it's been waiting for us a long time."

Ben was antsy, but he agreed.

Caleb didn't know for sure if there was gold buried in the desert, but something had drawn Ted Rantoul to this desolate, forsaken country. Caleb was interested in what that was. Maybe it was Aztec treasure and maybe not, but it had to be some adventure of the mind as well. Caleb had never been a reflective man, his experience showed that. He was attracted, though, as Erma Rantoul's brother had been, by an idea larger than himself, larger than his own circumstance. Caleb had no way of explaining this to Ben and knew that Ben had no way of appreciating it, so he kept his own counsel.

They crossed the rail line, and the river south of Nueva Casas. Beyond that was open country, a pocket of desert and scrub on the slope of the cordillera, the barren waste called Mandragon by the Spaniards and known to the Indians as the Land of the Dead, *la Tierra de los Muertos*. They watered the horses and filled their canteens, and pushed ahead.

Placido Geist slipped out of Agua Prieta under cover of darkness. He'd already taken some elementary precautions

late that afternoon, first sending a wire to Joshua Spengler back in El Paso, advising the deputy he could be reached either at his hotel or in care of the local *commandante*. Spengler was sharp enough to work that one out for himself. Then he took an idle turn around the town before heading back to the hotel for dinner. He made a point of asking the front desk clerk to arrange for a bath the next morning and retired for the night with a book under his arm. Placido Geist had borrowed this book from Erma Rantoul with a promise to return it in good condition. He stayed up for another hour or so, reading it. The book reported on an expedition undertaken for the American Museum of Natural History and was written by a man named Edward Drinker Cope.

It was close to ten thirty when he put the book to one side, got to his feet and drew the blinds, and turned out the lights. He stood by the window looking down into the empty street, and after a while, the watchers withdrew. There were only two of them. Placido Geist didn't think he was worth that much of the commandant's notice, but the man was greedy and spies came cheap. He packed quietly and efficiently in the darkened room and lay down on the bed fully dressed, but he didn't sleep. He

listened to the creaking of the timbers as the old building settled, the voices of a few guests passing in the corridor, and the occasional cart or carriage crossing the plaza outside until well past midnight. When everything had quieted down, he got up again and went over to the tall casement window that opened on the verandah. The sash was ajar, and he could sniff the cooling air. There was a whisper of insects, the call of a night bird, the faint tinny rhythm of an accordion and guitars from a cantina down the street. In the distance a dog barked, and then another one took it up. On the far side of the plaza he could hear the sentries in front of the police barracks changing their watch, the muffled clank of hardware and the commands of the sergeant-at-arms.

He hitched his saddlebags over his shoulder, took up his grip, and stepped out of the window onto the porch, alert to the sound of his own footfalls. He'd taken off his spurs and wrapped them in a flannel shirt inside his valise. He ducked around the corner of the building. The porch ended at a low shed behind what was probably the hotel kitchen. He climbed over the railing and edged out onto the sloping roof. It was a ten foot drop to the ground.

Placido Geist was pretty lim-

ber for an old man, but he didn't want to break his ankle jumping off a shed, not and have to explain it later. He crouched down and looked over. It probably looked higher from above, he thought. He lowered his saddlebags and let them drop, and squirmed around on his belly, his breathing labored. He eased off the lip of the roof and let go. His legs collapsed underneath him when he hit the ground, and he went down abruptly in the street with the wind knocked out of him. He rolled over and lurched to his feet, brushing the dirt off his britches, but it appeared he was none the worse for wear. He gathered up his tackle, irritated with himself, and limped off down the street toward the livery stable.

The boy mucking out the stalls was young, with a cast in one eye and apparently backward. He seemed frightened, and Placido Geist spoke to him quietly and kindly, giving him a few pesos in coin. He didn't want the stableboy alerting his master or, worse, the Rurales, but neither did he want to do the boy an injury. He figured the youth would be beaten in the morning anyway, for letting him go, but there was no help for that. He therefore made no explanation, judging that an explanation would only make the boy more anxious and all the

more likely to seek unwelcome advice. The boy put a bridle on the chestnut mare and led her out. Placido Geist saddled her himself. Mounting, he leaned down, clapped the boy on the shoulder, and thanked him, gruffly. The boy grinned up at him and went to swing open the big stable doors. Placido Geist took the mare out into the street at a gentle walk. He glanced back at the stableboy, who gave him a cheerful wave as he closed the double doors. Placido Geist raised his hand and turned the horse's head away from the main avenue, into the shadows of the back streets. He made his way through the sleeping town to the outskirts and then kicked the horse up into a canter, headed southeast for the Chihuahua border. He figured the Case brothers had a head start on him.

They'd covered a lot of ground, but much of it going in circles. Ben complained about that. The cracked alkali was hard on the horses, working its way up under their shoes and into their hooves, and hard on the eyes. The reflections made the two men squint. They'd been at it three days, Ben reminded Caleb, with nothing to show for it. The treasure was imaginary, or

Rantoul had exaggerated his claims.

Caleb pressed on stubbornly, looking for a landmark he couldn't exactly describe. He'd know the place when he found it, he insisted.

The morning of that third day they were riding up a dry river course. The shallow wash began to open up at either side, and they found themselves on the edge of a featureless salt pan, a shimmering waste that receded before them. To one side the foothills of the cordillera began their ragged rise, shoulders of limestone broken by narrow canyons. Caleb took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh, and then slapped the horse's rump with it, trotting ahead, angling for the higher ground. Ben followed behind. They climbed the far bank, the soft shale giving way under the weight of their horses like a biscuit crumbling.

Caleb pulled up and dismounted. He gave the reins to Ben and hunkered down. Among the hoofprints were dislodged fragments of bone, or what looked like bone, but when he picked a fragment up, it disintegrated in his hand. The rock itself was brittle. He took a piece and cracked it with the handle of his knife, chipping at the layers. It slivered off like flints, and he saw etched in the sediment

an imprint of an insect or a small crustacean. He held it out to Ben. Ben glanced at it without curiosity and shrugged. "It's a bug," he said.

"Or was," Caleb said. "A million years ago."

Ben leaned wearily on his saddlehorn and looked down at his brother. "What's that to me?" he asked.

"A boneyard," Caleb told him. "To a man like Rantoul, a treasure house."

Ben shrugged. "You saying this is it?" he asked, gazing off toward the horizon.

"It's an educated guess," Caleb said.

Ben swung down off his horse. "Well, it's my guess we might find water in one of those arroyos," he said. "Wood for a fire maybe. I take it you mean to set up camp in this stretch of country."

"That hogback over there," Caleb suggested. "Gives us a starting point. Good place to spy out the ground."

"Wouldn't want this patch of desert to be the last place I saw," Ben remarked.

"Nor would I," Caleb said.

They made camp with their backs to the rocks, and Caleb spent the afternoon working back and forth over the broken ground, looking for a sign that Rantoul had been there before them. Ben lay in the shadows

smoking. He had damn little faith in Caleb's notion, but he'd come this far. He might as well see it through.

Toward dusk Caleb rode in and got off his horse. Ben had a fire going and offered him some coffee. Caleb sucked at it out of a tin saucer. Ben poked in the fire with a charred stick. The only wood was mesquite. It burned as quickly as dry leaves, with an oily, resinous smell, almost medicinal. "I don't think those Spaniards left a thing worth finding," Ben muttered. "Just their bones."

A light gust of wind came down the arroyo, raising a dust as fine as chalk. It turned iridescent in the twilight, masking the setting sun like a sheet of gauze, and then the wind died away and the dust drifted down, settling onto their clothes and gear.

"Supposing you're right," Caleb said. "Where does that leave us?"

Ben stood up and cupped his hands at his temples, shading his eyes. "Rider coming," he said.

Caleb scrambled to his feet. "Where?" he asked.

"Behind us," Ben said. He pointed. "The way we came."

The mounted figure wavered in the distance.

"He can't be trailing us," Caleb said. He peered at the rider.

The twilight was vague and tricky.

Ben went to his horse and pulled the Springfield out of the saddle scabbard. He worked the bolt.

"Hold up a minute, now, Ben," Caleb said.

"Why?" Ben asked him. He got down on his belly with the rifle, threading his arm through the sling.

"It's a thousand yards or more, over half a mile," Caleb said. "You can't even make out the range."

Ben bunched up his sheepskin coat and laid it on the rocks. He rested the forestock of the rifle on it. "I could hit a gnat's ass at a thousand yards," he said.

"With a .30-06? He'll pass us by," Caleb said, looking from his brother to the rider.

"Not closer than a thousand yards, he won't," Ben said. He lifted the sights on the Springfield and adjusted them for elevation. There was next to no wind at all now.

"Jesus," Caleb said. "I don't think this is necessary."

"You never do," Ben said.

This country had been a vast inland sea in prehistoric times, Placido Geist knew from reading Cope's book, stretching all the way from the Gulf of Mexico to the ice sheets of the Arctic.

Great herds had moved south from Canada long before the coming of man, mastodons and woolly mammoths, aurochs and bison, the game trails followed by sabertoothed tigers and packs of dire wolves. They had fed and mated and fought, and left their bones on this great alluvial plain. In the sediment below were the remains of dinosaurs and fish that walked on dry land, flying reptiles and other fabulous monsters of the earth's past. Erma Rantoul's brother had come to this seemingly barren place looking for the hand of God writ large, Placido Geist thought, and found it. He himself was looking for something a little less inspiring. He had the sense somehow that Caleb Case had divined in Erma Rantoul's letters to her brother the feeling of urgency Ted Rantoul had communicated. It didn't matter what Caleb thought he might find, it only mattered that he thought he might find it, and that Placido Geist would catch up with him here. It didn't occur to him that the Case boys might catch up with him first. He had a few tricks up his sleeve yet.

He was studying the ground ahead, keeping the horse to a slow walk. They'd passed this way in front of him, two riders, and not that long before. The impressions were faint but legi-

ble, and the way the wind scoured the alkali, prints wouldn't last long. He pulled up and looked off toward the barren mountains to his right. He might have caught a quick flicker of fading light, reflected off dull metal. The horse shied suddenly, staggering, and collapsed all of a piece, as if her hamstrings had been cut, and the report of the rifle slapped past him even as he tried to jerk her head around and kick his feet free of the stirrups. He jumped clear just as she hit the ground, the breath knocked out of her, and he sprawled alongside, lucky not to be pinned underneath. He scrabbled around on his stomach, keeping the bulk of the mare between him and the rocks. The horse squealed and thrashed. He didn't want the animal to roll on top of him. He pulled a skinning knife out of his boot and grabbed for the mare's head, her eyes rolling. She snapped at him with her teeth as he drove the knife up under her jaw and cut her throat. She shivered and stiffened. Placido Geist lay as still as the horse, murmuring gently to her in Spanish as she quickly bled to death.

The sun was just down now, and the valley was in shadow, but the clouds caught the last of a red, smoky light that made the rocks seem closer. It gave the

sandstone the color of coral. He shifted his weight carefully and eased the heavy gun off the saddle bow. It was a Sharps with iron sights, chambered for a .45-70 custom handload. He laid the long barrel across the withers of the dead mare, opened the breech, and loaded a shell. He put his hat on the ground and cocked the hammer, keeping his position low so he wouldn't present a good target. It was hard to tell, but he thought the shot had come from the hogback some twelve hundred yards away. It was a hell of a distance, and a hell of a good shot for a man to make, but maybe he'd been aiming for the rider, not the horse. Placido Geist figured they'd come out, sooner or later, to see if he were really all that dead. He fixed the range at twelve hundred yards and waited for them to show themselves. He was angry at himself for being careless, and he was mad at the Case brothers for killing his horse, but he wasn't impatient. You were dead a long time, the way he saw it. He meant them to be dead first.

"Told you so," Ben said, grinning. "Hit a gnat's ass."

"Got the horse, anyway," Caleb said.

"Better make sure of him, then, before we lose the light altogether," Ben said.

"You mean to ride down there and finish him off?"

"If he's not dead, he's hurt," Ben said. "But he could still crawl off, come full dark, maybe circle around, get the drop on us. I don't feature that."

"You're the better shot between the two of us," Caleb said. "I'll go. You can cover me."

Ben shook his head and mounted the bay. He pulled the gelding's head around and sat in the saddle looking down at his brother. The last light off the rocks picked him out like a formation of quartz, rosy and incandescent. "You been taking my side far too long, Caleb," Ben said. "You told me that yourself. It's time I did my own business." He straightened up and stood in the stirrups, gazing across the valley. "I reckon we've about played out our string together. We should go our separate ways."

Caleb felt a great lump of sadness in his chest. "Ben," he said, taking a step forward.

There was a sharp whistle, parting the still air like paper tearing, and Ben and the horse went down together in a tangle. The boom of the buffalo gun echoed in the canyons. The gelding flailed its feet in the air, rolling on Ben, and stumbled upright, shaken and terrified but unhurt.

Caleb dug his way over to Ben

on his elbows and knees. Ben had been hit square in the hip, the bullet striking bone and severing an artery. His off leg had been broken by the weight of the horse. Blood was pumping out inside his pants, and the fabric was already dark and soggy. The sand underneath him was soaking it up. The look he gave Caleb was puzzled and vacant.

"Christ-a-mighty, Ben," Caleb muttered, tugging at his belt and pulling it out of the loops. He couldn't see where a tourniquet would do much good, but he had to try.

"I guess the son of a bitch ain't dead yet," Ben whispered hoarsely.

"Guess he ain't," Caleb agreed, struggling to get some kind of pressure on the wound. Chips of bone showed through Ben's trousers like bits of eggshell, and Caleb's hands were slippery with blood. The arterial flow had weakened to only a trickle. Caleb sat back on his heels.

"He's killed me, the bastard," Ben said.

"I'm afraid he has," Caleb said.

"He's not the only one," Ben said.

"Ah, Jesus," his brother said, closing his eyes.

"I meant me, Caleb," Ben said. Caleb looked at him.

"Got nothing to lose by speaking the truth," Ben said.

Caleb hunkered closer, cradling Ben's head in his hands. "You were never a bad boy, Ben," he said.

"No, but I was always contrary," Ben said. "And now I'm going to up and die on you, with that bastard out there laying in wait." He clutched at Caleb's arm. There was next to no strength in his grip. "You have to get up into the hills behind, Caleb. You can't stick around on my account. You've got to leave me."

"I wouldn't do that," Caleb said.

"Well, the hell with you, then," Ben said, smiling. His voice was slurred, and he sounded sleepy.

Caleb bowed his head.

"Caleb?" Ben asked.

"I'm here, Ben," Caleb said.

"You're a damn fool," Ben muttered, and the breath went out of him in a sigh. His body quivered briefly and settled into the sand.

Caleb didn't quite believe it, and it took him a moment or two to realize his brother was actually dead.

Ben's horse whickered, edgy and still quaking slightly. Caleb wiped his hands off in the sand. He got to his feet to catch up the horse. The horse was skittish. So was Caleb. He pulled the gelding's head down and knelt in the sand. The valley was dark

now, and he couldn't read the shadows.

He got hold of the reins of his own mount, walked them back into the arroyo where there was water dripping off the rocks into a shallow pool in the stone, and hobbled them. They wouldn't move from the water. Caleb backed away carefully, moving up the canyon. He found a notch protected from the wind that covered his back and left him a line of sight to the horses. He shrugged up inside his sheepskin and crouched down with his rifle to wait for daybreak.

By first light Placido Geist had worked his way well up into the rocks. The rising sun was behind him, and it tipped the sandstone buttresses long before it reached the salt floor of the valley. He had good position on the horses. He assumed rightly that whichever of the Case brothers was left would wait for him to make a try for them. A man on foot in this country was as good as dead, and so was Case. Placido Geist shifted on his hams and bided his time. He would have shot the taller one, but he didn't know which was which. He hoped he'd killed Ben. He had questions for Caleb. On the other hand, he was willing to settle for getting out of this alive, which was more than he'd settle for with Caleb Case.

The sun moved higher, and the light turned white and pitiless, the rocks losing their color. Ochre and red and violet bleached out to a pale dun. The salt pan blazed. The heat began to rise off the desert floor. It occurred to him he could always shoot one of the horses, which would almost certainly draw fire, but one horse between the two men was cutting it a little fine. Placido Geist had the indifference to physical discomfort of a man who was part indio and part Saxon, and he was prepared to wait it out. He settled in with his back to the rocks below an overhang that offered a scant amount of shade and gave him a decent field of fire. He could have used a smoke; but for the moment he didn't have any real complaints.

It was close to noon before Placido Geist saw his man break cover. He'd been waiting for him almost six hours, but Case had been holed up in the rocks the better part of the night, too, and he was moving awkwardly, his joints still a little stiff, careful not to expose himself as he worked his way through the jumbled schist and boulders at the foot of the canyon wall, closing in on the horses without giving somebody at the mouth of the canyon a clear shot from below him. He hadn't figured Placido Geist

was sighting down on him from above, behind him in the rocks. Placido Geist cocked the big Sharps and eased off the set trigger. He had a better than even chance at hitting Case square in the upper body, but that was a kill shot and he wanted Case alive for the time being. If he shot to wing him at this range and missed, he probably wouldn't get another chance, and sometime before dark he'd have to come down out of the rocks himself and try for a fight at close quarters, or Case might just take the horses and get clean away during the night. Placido Geist adjusted the sights for elevation. Little by little, Case was widening the gap between them. It was four hundred yards to the horses, and Case was less than fifty feet away from them. Now he flattened himself against an outcrop, out of sight of the horses but in full view of the man with the gun at his back. Placido Geist took a deep breath, let most of it out, and aimed for the meaty part of the left thigh. He squinted along the barrel and squeezed off a round. The big gun slammed against his shoulder, and the enormous report echoed off the barren rock, boxing his ears.

The heavy .45-70 softnose caught Caleb at the back of the knee and fragmented, shatter-

ing the joint, and the impact knocked him right off his feet. There was a moment of shock and excruciating pain, and then panic as he tried to crawl back up the slope into the shadow of the rocks and found his left leg gone numb and completely useless. Then he got a purchase, digging his fingers into the shards of gravel, and managed to haul himself behind a hump of collapsed shinglestone, his hands bleeding and his breathing ragged, his body slick with sweat. He eased over onto his back, grunting with the effort. He shifted his crippled leg and probed for the damage with his hands. He could barely lift his head, but he kept his left thumb on the femoral artery, struggling with his right hand to shuck off the web belt with his pistol and canteen, and clamped the belt around his thigh. There was nothing to slip under it and tighten it with, and he hunched himself back into a halfway upright position, drawing the .45 pistol and waiting for the man who'd shot him to show himself. He knew he might pass out from the loss of blood, but he hoped he could at least kill the bastard first, to make up for a little of his own foolishness. He'd like that.

Placido Geist made a cautious approach, taking his time. He knew a man who grabbed the

wrong end of a dead snake and still died from its bite. When his shadow crossed Caleb, Caleb seemed to be asleep. Placido Geist reached down and picked the .45 pistol out of his limp hand.

Caleb stirred fretfully and frowned. He seemed almost childlike to Placido Geist, and the old bounty hunter chose not to wake him. What was the point? Ben Case had needed killing, and so had Caleb by the end, but Placido Geist took no satisfaction in it, other than having lived to tell the tale. He went to calm the horses, spooked by the noise and showing the whites of their eyes. He had to ride one or both of them out of this weary place, and he might even have to eat one before all was said and done. That was enough. A horse was no smarter

than a cow when you came right down to it. He wasn't going to pack the Case brothers out on the bay gelding. He had no need of proof.

Placido Geist didn't give a damn about the reward posted by the Union Pacific. The only obligation he had was to an old maid back in West Texas. His report would give Erma Rantoul cold comfort, but in his experience, that was all the comfort there was. He tightened the cinches on both horses and went back to check on Caleb Case. The man was dead. He buried the two brothers in the canyon and stacked some rocks on their grave. One of these days somebody might do the same for him, but he wasn't counting on it. There weren't all that many things you could count on. Being dead was one.

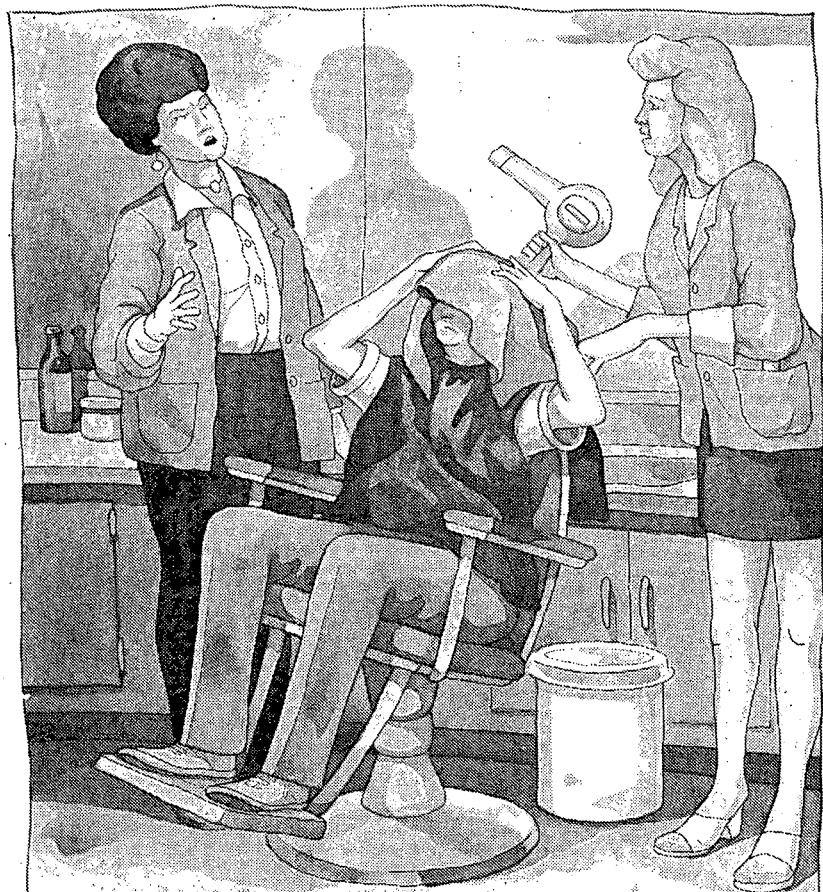
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Indeed. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "August Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 156.



Skin Deep

Jas. R. Petrin

"Murder? I can tell you what murder is," Mrs. Aird asserted bitterly from the depths of the hair-treatment chair in the Easy Clip. "Murder is trying to get your hair done just right, paying fifty dollars for it, and there it is like something the cat dragged in."

"Patience. You got to have patience, dear, that's what beauty's all about." Evelyn Culver dipped her fingers into the large plastic tub for more Formula and bent over Mrs. Aird with her brows pulled into a knowing scowl. "You think Liz Taylor and Cher got to look like they do overnight? You think they just got up one day and said, 'Well, I guess I'll be beautiful from now on,' then sashayed on down to the beauty parlor and paid their fifty dollars? Listen. They worked at it."

"Workled it? What's that mean?" Mrs. Aird seized on the word like a newfound hope.

Evelyn stooped lower.

"Worked at it, dear."

The older woman snorted and prodded her hearing aid. "Worked at it, workled it—somebody somethinged it, that's for sure. I never get treatment like that. I mean, just look at them two. And then look at me. See the difference? What happens here, you just smear goop on my head, forget about me, and go sit

down and read magazines. If that's work, you can work me to death. Try cleaning offices for a living, then you'll know what work is."

"It's not goop, dear, it's Guy Pierre's European Hair Thickening Formula, guaranteed to stop a lady's hair from falling out."

"But does it work?"

"Of course it works. How many baldheaded European ladies have you seen? Just think about it. Think about Mrs. Olkosh, works housekeeping there at the Do Come Inn. She's from Europe, or someplace like that. Hair sprouting out all over her."

Evelyn gave the goop on Mrs. Aird's head another rub, added another small daub from the five gallon tub on the floor next to the counter, then stepped back and surveyed the situation with her head cocked to one side. Without even turning around, she said to her assistant Dianne Freely, who was just banging in breathless through the door, "You can take over here, Dianne—if it's not too much bother. Mrs. Aird needs a rinse so her scalp don't turn green, and I need a break before my arms fall off. How come you're late this time?" She nudged the back of Mrs. Aird's neck and added in a low voice, "This ought to be good."

"No," Mrs. Aird grumbled, "I won't wear a hood."

Dianne hurriedly put away her purse and sweater, then levered Mrs. Aird's glistening scalp down over the basin in one quick, practiced drop that shot the older woman's breath out of her lungs with a whoosh. She wriggled into a smock and turned the water on.

"It's this murder. I got to talking about it with that cute RCMP officer, the one always sits with Chief Robideau down at the Netley? See, I stopped there at the lunch bar for a muffin, just like usual, and—"

"The RCMP, was it?" Evelyn gave Mrs. Aird another nudge, in the shoulder this time. "You sure it wasn't the NBC? Or the KGB? Are you sure it wasn't the L-M-N-O-P wanted your opinion on the subject of murder, just when you were on your way to work?"

Dianne snapped her gum. She thumbed the sprayer and shot a stream of steaming water at Mrs. Aird's head, and Mrs. Aird hollered, "Yow!"

"You can tease all you like. I helped them a lot. Talking to Chief Robideau, I suddenly remembered seeing a str-a-nge blue Magic Wagon drive down Burton Street the night poor Emmy Gilliam disappeared, and soon as I said it, the chief got his pen out right away and wrote it all down and put the note away in his pocket."

"Huh. Probably something you reminded him of, that's all—stop at the Family Fare for a pound of baloney. What's a Magic Wagon when it's at home?"

"A car. A truck. One of those little vans. Not from around here. It had a smoky exhaust, and it drove past the Netley Hotel, then turned left."

"Nothing magic about that. I had a Toyota one time, it poured smoke out behind it like a mosquito fogger with an attitude, and it turned left all by itself when you let go the steering wheel."

"Halp!" Mrs. Aird gasped under the water. "Gah!"

"Patience," Evelyn commanded crossly, "we're workling it!" She turned back to Dianne. "We were talking about that murder before you got here, ten minutes late, and I told Mrs. Aird, I says, it's an awful thing and all that, and I don't mean to be disrespectful, but at least Emmy Gilliam had the good sense to get her hair permed that day. Pete Melynchuk was hanging around the Green Valley Funeral Home when Prancing Al Evans brought her in, and he said her hair looked the best he'd seen it in years, sticking out from under the sheet at the end of the gurney, shining, he told me, in the sun. *I told him*

more people ought to have her good sense."

"Most people don't know they're going to get murdered."

"They don't know they're going to be hit by cement trucks, either, but it's like going out with holes in your underwear. You don't realize, you don't think, then all of a sudden—splang!"

Dianne sniffed. "Anyways, a blue van, smoking. I told them all about it. And it turned left at the Netley Hotel."

She hauled Mrs. Aird up and dropped a towel over her head, rubbing vigorously. Mrs. Aird warbled from underneath it, "I cat feeee . . . I cat feeee . . ."

"All right," said Dianne crossly, letting go of the towel, "now you can see all you like. Do your own toweling where you think you need it, and then shout when you're done and I'll put the dryer on you."

"Trowel myself?"

"Towel yourself!"

Mrs. Aird toweled briskly. "I swear I don't know why I come here. I always get treated like a horse in a barn."

"Oh, for the love of Mike," Evelyn said, "I wish you wouldn't always say that." And she muttered to Dianne Freely under her breath, "Just tuck another lump of that sweet toffee there in the dish into her mouth, will you? And remember you got to

switch the dryer on low and then smack it. It's been acting up, you got to watch." She bent over Mrs. Aird. "What'd you say, dear?"

"I said I want to know what Dianne just told you. Did I hear her say she seen a fan?"

"A van, dear. A smoky blue van."

Mrs. Aird harrumphed loudly under the towel, "Oh, is that all? I seen a blue van, too, but the A&P never asked me about it. I seen it again this morning."

"Really?" Dianne looked at her.

"Certainly. You're not the only one with eyes poking out the front of your head. And I seen a sign on the side of it, too—big gold letters, all fancy. I don't know why you don't tell that part of the story while you're at it."

"A sign?"

"You heard me. Good grief, maybe you're the one ought to wear a hearing aid. It said HOLLYWOOD BODY SHOP, END OF MAIN, MB. I meant to tell Evelyn about it soon as I came in, but then she got after me right away about beauty and murder, hollering and screaming about Cher and Liz Taylor, and the next thing I know, I guess I must of forgot." Her eyes suddenly gleamed brightly. "Anyways, the main thing is, it looks like you two are finally going to

get some competition around here."

Evelyn dropped the towel over Mrs. Aird's head again and looked questioningly at Dianne with deep worry lines on her face.

"Another beauty parlor? Here? I don't believe it! There's scarcely enough business in this town to keep you and me alive. They'll ruin all of us. What can they be thinking?"

Dianne snapped her gum. "Don't get all wound up. I heard it isn't this kind of a beauty shop at all. It's one of them, what they call, body shops."

"You mean where they knock the dents out of you?"

"No, silly. A place where they do your cellulite, tan and massage, do your leg wax, your toe and fingernails. All that kind of a thing." She looked put out with herself. "I never knew they had themselves a Magic Wagon, though."

Evelyn wasn't mollified. She switched on the hair dryer, slapped it till it sputtered and squawked, then shoved it into Dianne Freely's hands.

"All I know," she yelled bitterly above the rising wail, "people only got so much money to spend on beauty. Every dollar left at that shop will be a dollar less for us, and we're already perched on the edge of ruin. I'm going to sashay down there later today

and find out what the heck's going on. Make sure they're on the level. And they darn well better be, or someone's going to hear about it at the town office. And I don't pay my Business Council dues for nothing, neither!"

"You think we should send flowers for Emmy?" The dryer was screeching as if it was going to fly apart. Dianne kept it trained on Mrs. Aird like some sort of futuristic gun.

"Actually, I was thinking maybe a card. That was her first visit to the Easy Clip in almost three years after all, and I'll just tell you, it wasn't no picnic. In fact it was like trimming a barbed wire fence. You pretty near had to use side-cutters!"

At three o'clock Evelyn left the Easy Clip in Dianne's questionable care and hurried briskly down Burton Street, as she'd promised, to check out the new beauty shop situation and see for herself just what the heck was going on. She was worried. She hadn't been kidding when she'd said they were on the edge of ruin: the Easy Clip was barely squeezing by; it couldn't afford to lose a single customer. And Evelyn had been racking her brain for months trying to figure out how on earth she was ever going to acquire enough money to get out of this hatchet-in-the-back-

of-the-head town and retire to that comfortable condo in the city that she so badly wanted.

The new business had taken over the old Etna Pizza Palace. Someone had yanked the raggedy striped awning off and painted the clapboard front of the place bright red. A sign on the door announced in fluorescent gold lettering HOLLYWOOD BODY SHOP—GRAND OPENING! Evelyn grunted in disgust. Body shop! It sounded like some kind of a prostitutional hootchy-kootchy place to her. Some kind of a sexual perversion establishment. She took the doorknob boldly in her hand and walked in.

The interior had been redecorated, too. And with just about the same degree of taste. Mauves, pinks, and purples, with velvet wallpaper slapped on the walls and heavy blue curtains muffling the windows—it looked more like a funeral parlor than a beauty parlor, with the sort of ambiance Prancing Al Evans might like to have down at the Green Valley.

A chubby middle-aged woman with bold bright eyes peered up from a cluttered desk, a pretty face, all dimples and grins.

"Good afternoon," she said cheerfully, "isn't it a beautiful day?" As they flickered over Evelyn, the woman's eyes grew even brighter, her mouth slowly

opened, and she rose and came bustling around the end of the desk to stop and stare straight into Evelyn's face. "Good heavens!" she cried. "Your skin!"

Evelyn drew back in alarm. "Hah? What?"

"Your skin!"

"Hey? What's wrong with it?"

"Don't move!" The woman appraised Evelyn openly, her eyes darting in quick, discerning little motions under her long, curling lashes. Then she slowly shook her head. "If you don't mind me saying so, I'm afraid there's not a great deal we can do for a person like you in this shop, dear."

"Good Lord! Why the heck not?" Evelyn clapped both hands to her face and rubbed vigorously, wondering what terrible condition could have afflicted her since she'd last looked at herself in the Easy Clip mirror only fifteen minutes ago. "What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing. That's just it. Why your skin is as clear and flawless as any I've seen. In fact, you've got one of the loveliest and healthiest complexions I've ever seen in my life!"

"I have?"

"Absolutely."

Evelyn relaxed and let her breath slide out. "Whew! Well, that's all right, then. You had me worried there a minute. I thought maybe I'd caught one of

those new germs like what I seen on CNN a while back. That germ they brought over from England that eats up your skin and won't stop."

Evelyn reevaluated the woman. Perhaps she wasn't so chubby after all. Pleasantly plump, was all. Recovering a little from the unexpected reception, Evelyn cleared her throat and said:

"I been complimented on my complexion before, of course, lots of times. It's always been my best feature. But all the same, it's nice to hear somebody mention it. Like I tell my customers, a woman can't get too many compliments."

"No, indeed, she certainly can't." The woman nodded. "In fact, that's the business we're both in, isn't it? Helping other ladies receive the compliments they really deserve." She smiled and held out her hand. "You're Evelyn Culver, aren't you? You've got the Easy Clip down the street. You were pointed out to me the first day I set foot in this town, by the real estate lady that brought me here. I'm Eadie Block, and I've got this place now, as you can see, and I'm *very* pleased to meet you. After all, when you think about it, we're two of a kind, aren't we, the business we're in? Kindred spirits, and all that."

"Yes . . . well . . ." The woman's hand was soft and warm.

Her fingers were strong. Evelyn felt herself gradually yielding to her smooth, easy charm and had to struggle to remember why she had come in here in the first place, wondering if her original purpose had been all that important after all.

"Please," Mrs. Block said, "have a look round. I was just doing a little settling in, making sure everything's in its proper place." She gave a grand sweep of her arm. "What do you think of it?"

Evelyn glanced around doubtfully. There had to be *something* complimentary she could say:

"Any customers yet?"

"Ah, only one."

"I see you got a photocopier. That must be handy."

"Oh, right," Eadie Block said. Her smile thinned, and she gave a dismissive flick of her red nails. "I don't even know why it's here. It got left over from another business I had. Tell you what, though. If you ever need to use it, let me know."

"You had another business?"

"Several. I'm always on the lookout for something new to do with my money." She lowered her voice. "I'll be honest with you. What it is, see, I have this friend who's a financial genius. I mean it. A *genius*. The most unbelievable man. Since I started taking his advice, I can't stop

making money no matter what I do. In fact, I have to reinvest it in businesses like this one, to try for a bit of a loss."

Evelyn gaped at her. This was something new. "You mean you want to lose money?"

"Well, you might say that. More advice from my friend. I need the tax writeoff." Eadie Block shrugged and smiled sweetly. "Like I said, he's just too good. He's pushed me up into a tax bracket that's stratospheric! Simply stratospheric! I can introduce you to him if you like. Maybe he can help you, too. You never know."

"You're very kind." Evelyn was bewildered, all of this coming at her so fast.

"Not at all. And listen. You know what else I'm going to do as a sort of a get-acquainted gesture?" She went back around the desk and rummaged in a drawer. "Give you a Total."

"A who-what?"

"A Total, dear. What we call a complete-and-comprehensive-body-makeover solution."

"You mean some kind of a chemical?"

The woman laughed.

"No, no, dear. 'Solution' is a new business buzzword. I mean a treatment. Free and on the house, available anytime, just be sure and phone before you come, that's all." Evelyn began to protest, but Mrs. Block had

already brought out a glossy pink-edged coupon and was pressing it on her. "I had these made up for my most special customers. Ninety dollar value, good till the end of May." She smiled sweetly. "You'll love being Totaled."

"But, er . . ."

Evelyn was vaguely aware that she was being shifted toward the door.

"I want you to know," the woman went on, "that I'm so pleased you stopped in to welcome me. But I'm real busy right at the moment, so what I suggest we do is sit down and have coffee together soon. A good long chitchat, and solve all the world's beauty problems. It's been so nice meeting you. Really!"

A moment later, Evelyn found herself back outside the Hollywood Body Shop with the fresh-painted door clicking shut at her back.

For a few moments she stood there, blinking in the sun, feeling a tiny bit giddy and wondering what the heck had just happened to her. She had gone into the place feeling anxious and irritable, meaning to have a dead-serious discussion, maybe even a battle, about the dismal small-town business opportunities, tax rates, and service penetrations, and she had come out feeling strangely pleased and good

about herself, with a ninety dollar Total Body Makeover coupon in her hand, and a vague notion of investments where you earned so much money you had to find ways to go out and get rid of some of it before the government got after you.

She started back to the Easy Clip, her mind whirling, studying the coupon. A Total. Evelyn had never been Totaled before. She wasn't sure she really liked the sound of it: it had a vaguely sinister ring. But a ninety dollar value! Well! And then, of course, there was the Financial Genius. He sounded like just the sort of fellow who could get her into that condo. Evelyn very much wanted to learn more about him.

Coutts backed the van into the freshly graveled parking stall at the rear of the Hollywood Body Shop, stones popping under the tires and blue smoke poot-pooting from the exhaust, then switched off the ignition and swung his long legs out the door. He was a rangy, sunburnt man with thin, sloping shoulders and brown, brooding eyes, and he had spent most of the afternoon at the carwash out back of Al's Gas-O-Hol, carefully vacuuming the seats and floor of the vehicle and wiping it down inside and out. The boss-lady

had said that you couldn't be too meticulous nowadays, that every day it got harder to carve out a living in this world.

He looked up to see the lady herself frowning in the shade of the half open doorway and waiting for him.

"Well?" Eadie Block said.

"Well, what?"

"Well, did you do a proper job of it? Or did you leave enough lint and hairs to keep Inspector Cluiseau down there at the police station working three shifts of overtime?"

"It's clean."

"Thank the Lord for small favors."

She turned and led him into the shop. "And now I suppose you want something to eat. You always do. I swear you have a hollow leg down there, or a hollow something, anyway." In the cramped kitchen she opened the refrigerator, took out a partly consumed box of sugar doughnuts, and set them on the table; then she plugged in the kettle. "I'll tell you what still rankles me, though," she went on in an uncomplimentary voice. "The fact that you went and used a . . . a . . ." She seemed so annoyed she could barely squeeze out the words.

"A knife?" he said helpfully.

She glowered. "That was so stupid! And then to hide what you'd done in a woodpile of all

things! How long did you expect that to last? Naturally, somebody found out right away. People are always poking around woodpiles. Maybe what you ought to of done is used a culvert."

He looked at her peevishly with his eyelids half closed.

"Maybe what *you* ought to of done, you shouldn't of bonked her."

Eadie Block slammed down the mugs.

"You got a colossal nerve to sit there and say that! You think I *wanted* to bonk her? You think I woke up that morning looking for someone to bonk? What was I supposed to do, the way she marched in here pretending to be a normal customer, then suddenly coming out with those insinuations? She had a story to tell, mister, and she meant to tell it! A walking legal brief, too. Knew enough to put us away for the rest of our natural-born lives. You're darn right, I bonked her. What else could I do?"

He bared his teeth. "Well, you should of bonked her properly, then. When she woke up in the van and started rampaging around, what was I supposed to do? Got an answer for that?"

They held each other's gaze for a long moment.

"Kettle's boiling," he said.

"I hear it!" She turned away

and slopped hot water into the pot. "Good grief! You travel three hundred miles, you think you got a brand new territory, and inside of fifteen minutes there's a woman on the treatment table who knows everything about you, visiting her sister in that last town, if you can believe it, and getting letters from her ever since that read like the *National Enquirer*. Nope, she had to go." She glanced balefully at Coutts. "I suppose you got a good look through that peephole of yours?"

Coutts shrugged, and Mrs. Block let it go. She said:

"Another woman showed up here today, and she was pretty hot, too. Ready to torch the place down. Good thing I recognized her—the ditzy cow who runs the hair salon down the street. I knew she'd show up sooner or later and give me a hard time, and I cooled *her* down fast. I told her I was here to lose money, not make it, and she nearly fell over. It really rocked her. I think she might turn into a prospect. But you never know, do you? Fire springs back up when you least expect it."

"Right."

"We can't stay here. Not now. But we can't risk attracting suspicion, either, so we'll take customers for awhile, just like people expect us to do. There should be some good prospects here,

folks that wouldn't miss a few dollars out of their bank accounts, or who have a real high limit on their charge cards. Or folks looking out for financial advice. That's what we came here for. What we spent the two hundred dollars on paint and paper for, right?"

Her voice softened. She came around the table and began to knead his shoulders. "Would you like," she said, "a bit of a rub-down before I open the shop again?" He grunted. She drew him towards the treatment room door. "You're certainly a fine conversationalist," she said. "You can sit and spout finance like an economics professor, but when it comes to a chat, I think I'd rather have that Mrs. Gilliam here. I could of propped her up in a chair just for someone to talk to. Even if she *was* bonked."

"So," Dianne asked with a loud snap of her gum, "what'd you find out? Are they actually on the level over there or just what?"

Evelyn sat down to collect her thoughts.

"I suppose so. A lady owns the place. She seems very nice. Awful gushy—you know the type—but, well . . . nice." Evelyn swiveled to gaze at herself in the mirror. "She complimented me on my complexion."

"Yeah? Because you got no zits?"

Evelyn frowned fiercely. "Zits got nothing to do with it. I haven't had zits since I was seventeen. In fact, now I think of it, I *never* had zits." She turned back to the mirror and touched her cheek. "Same way I know hair, that woman knows a beautiful skin when she sees it."

"Better be careful," Dianne cautioned. "You'll go there one day to get your cellulite done, and the next thing you know you'll be spread out on her wall like an old trophy bear with its fur all plucked out."

"Cellulite? Me? What makes you think I need *my* cellulite done?"

"Nothing. Just the way you looked going down Burton Street in your cutoffs this summer. And the way I seen you bounce along Gimli beach, that's all."

"I don't bounce! Not down there, anyway!"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't! You're being ridiculous. And jealous."

"Nope, I'm not that." Dianne went over to the mirror and gazed appreciatively at her own, much younger, face. "No zits on this girl." She took a deep breath, sucked in her tummy, and admired her figure; then she caught sight of Evelyn's reflection in the glass and

wrinkled her brow. "What's that clutched in your fingers like a bus ticket?"

It was the coupon. Evelyn had forgotten all about it. She opened her hand and displayed the small rectangle of pink paper.

"A free bonus. For a Total. Her most special people get them."

"A Total? What's that?"

"I'm not sure. I guess where they give you the works."

"Oh. Like a hamburger. Well, don't cry to me when you're tacked on her wall with your mouth full of onions. She'll tell her friends, 'See that? Bagged her right here. Lured her in with a coupon, and won a gold medal with her at the Body Shop owners' annual skin competition.'"

"That's crazy. And anyway, I don't need a Total."

"Maybe just a cellulite job, that's all." Dianne suddenly looked at her watch. "Oh, oh! Time to go."

"There's still ten minutes."

"Not by my watch."

"There's something wrong with your watch. It runs slow in the mornings and fast in the afternoons."

"Maybe," Dianne said, busily gathering her things. "I guess it could be the change in the angle of the sun that does it. Or maybe it's you. Maybe *your* watch runs fast in the mornings, and

slow in the afternoons. Ever think of that?"

The door slammed behind her. Evelyn shook her head. She got up, moved closer to the mirror, and peered into it.

"Not one single zit on this face," she said, "in my whole entire life. Not one. And as for cellulite—" she patted the backs of her thighs "—that's the least of my problems. With this skin they'd write me up in one of their magazines, like Liz and Cher, if I was rich. They'd come and interview me by my pool. At my condo."

Mrs. Aird was pleased to have added the Hollywood Body Shop to her short list of Burton Street customers. The new woman, Mrs. Block, had seemed delighted to acquire Mrs. Aird's cleaning services. Prospective clients weren't always so warm. Some of them thought that because you were a teensy bit deaf, you must also be a dope, that the two things went together. But Mrs. Block had been especially nice—beaming at her, handing her a key and saying clearly, "Wonderful! I hate to clean. You can come every Sunday."

Now Sunday was not a day on which Mrs. Aird cared to work. Not that she was exceptionally devout, but she did feel that one day a week was required by a person for spiritual reflection.

But she couldn't turn the job down. Times were tough. It was hard to keep your head above water nowadays, so here she was.

She dropped her bulging flight bag down beside her Handy-Vac, and dragged out a few of her cleaning things: a feather duster, Windex, some polishing cloths, and a whiskbroom. She glanced around and made a quick assessment of the place. Start at the top and work down, that was her style. In this case begin with that badly painted valance above those ugly, thick drapes, then maybe wipe down that photocopy machine over there beside the wall, and keep going.

She dragged a chair over to the drapes, climbed up onto it, feather duster in hand, and went to work. She clucked her tongue. These were just about the heaviest drapes she'd ever seen. It was almost as if Mrs. Block didn't want passersby to see into the place, if you could feature that. She finished with the valance, climbed down off the chair, and took her dusting cloth and Windex over to the photocopy machine.

There something caught her attention. A familiar name. She plucked up a sheet of paper from the out tray of the machine, held it back from her face at arm's length, and squinted at it. At

first she couldn't quite figure out what she was looking at; only gradually did it make sense. It was the reproduced image of . . . yes. A credit card.

There were more sheets in the out tray, and she peered at each of them in turn. The next two showed a driver's license, copied on both sides, and the following sheets seemed to show the small spread-open pages of a bank passbook.

And each of the copied documents had Emily Gilliam's name on it.

Mrs. Aird did not know what to make of this.

Good old Emily. Emily Gilliam. Owner and operator of the Starlight Drive-in Theatre out there on the Gimli road. At one time her name had been Emily Barnhouse and her dad had owned the theater, but then she had married Dirk Gilliam and changed her name. Dirk was no prize and had very soon run off on her, and folks around town had joked that she would have done anything, even married that jerk, to get away from her father, who was a notorious tyrant and had hairs growing out of his nose. They'd been kidding, of course. They didn't know that one day she was going to get herself murdered.

But why was her name on these papers?

Maybe, Mrs. Aird thought,

Emmy had stopped in here just before she died in order to use the photocopier, and had absentmindedly left the copies behind. Mrs. Aird could only guess how that might have happened. She could have been passing by the shop and stopped to chat with the new owner, and Mrs. Block had invited her in and told her it was okay to use her machine.

But why would Emmy have left behind her copies? Wouldn't she be more likely to forget her originals? That's what usually happened in Mrs. Aird's experience.

Of course, there was another explanation.

With a dry swallow, and fighting every notion she had about professionalism and old fashioned ethics, Mrs. Aird picked up the papers, sat down at the desk, and began to read.

When Mrs. Aird finally got past Claudia Webb, the smart-alecky receptionist Chief Robideau put up with for some unknown reason, it was almost eleven o'clock. What *did* the man do that kept him so tied up he couldn't see a person until after a half-hour wait? And on a Sunday, too. Not a high day for criminals. Mrs. Aird kept a tight frown on her face when the chief finally re-

ceived her into his office with his big owly eyes, and she watched as he shook a Roloids tablet from a jar in his desk and gulped it down.

"You're supposed to chew those things," she informed him.

"I know. But that takes time." He shoved the tablets back into his desk.

"It's hard to believe," Mrs. Aird retorted crisply, meaning to take him down a peg, "that you can't find time to eat a Roloids properly. Or for seeing a legal citizen without a half-hour wait. I don't wait that long for a root canal."

"Yes," he said, smiling, "but this is more pleasant."

"Pheasant? What's pheasant got to do with it?"

He studied her a moment.

"Pleasant. I mean that visiting me is more pleasant than going to the dentist's." He rolled forward onto the points of his elbows and spoke a little louder. "So what brings you here this morning?"

"That murder of yours."

The chief's face fell into deep lines, all business now, frowning. "Go on."

"I came across something. Something that could be really terrible, all right? You know that new place we got here in town? That there Hollywood Body Shop?"

He nodded.

"Well," she said, "they're a new client of mine. I'll be cleaning in there every Sunday. I was there today. And I'm afraid to say there seems to of been some very peculiar goings-on in the place." She lowered her voice to a conspiratory whisper. "Guess what I found. They got photocopies there."

"Photocopies?"

"That's right. And every one of them's got a certain name splang all over it."

The chief's eyes narrowed.

"What certain name?"

"Emmy Gilliam's!" Mrs. Aird thumped her balled-up little fist down hard on the desk.

The chief continued to regard her with his tired, mournful eyes; then he got up from his desk and drifted over to the window. His back was to her the next time he spoke, and what he said didn't make a whole lot of sense.

"I presume that you fought these rapers."

"Fought them . . . ?"

He half turned, and she could see his lips move again.

"I said, I presume that you brought these papers?"

"No, no. I couldn't do that. They belong to my client, after all. Private property."

He tugged at his lip.

"But they're pheasants."

Pheasants again. "I told you,

this has nothing to do with pheasants!"

He let go of his lip with a snap. "*Evidence*, Mrs. Aird. I said, *evidence*! What I'm telling you is, if the papers support some claim you want to make, then maybe you should have brought them along with you so I could see them for myself."

"But they're still there at the shop, for heaven's sake. You can go there and look at them any time you want."

"I can't just barge in and ransack a private premise when I feel like it."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. It's against the law."

"Well," she shot back, "you just told me I ought to have done it! You expect me to break the law! Asking me why I didn't steal some personal papers! If I had, then I'd be the one that got arrested, I suppose!" She got angrily to her feet. "I'd be the one got slapped in jail—or worse!"

She strode to the door. She didn't want to hear any more. She'd had enough. She hurried from the chief's office and out to her car, fuming.

Evelyn had a small problem. She wanted to take advantage of the coupon so she could arrange to meet the financial genius Mrs. Block had spoken

about and maybe even have a consultation with him, if possible. But what could she say to Dianne Freely, after bragging about her zit-free complexion and saying that she didn't have a cellulite problem and certainly didn't need to get Totalo? Dianne would probably conclude that she was going in for a cellulite job. And Evelyn didn't even know what a cellulite job entailed, for crying in the sink!

Dianne—ten minutes late again that morning—was striking attitudes before the mirror, saying, "Actually, you know, it might be a great experience being Totalo! I know I could use a leg wax. And the body massage might be awful nice, too."

Evelyn was astounded.

"You mean to say that after warning me not to do it, telling me I'd probably wind up skinned on a wall, you'd actually go sashaying down there and get completely Totalo yourself?"

"Why not? It isn't my skin she wants."

"It'd cost you ninety dollars."

"Nope. It wouldn't cost nothing. You see, I got a coupon, too, same as yours. I found it stuffed in my mailbox when I got home last night, right there next to the Family Fare grocery flyer."

Evelyn didn't like this development.

"Wait a minute. Those cou-

pons are supposed to be for special people only."

"Well, I guess that makes me special then—along with every other girl at the Netley Lunch Bar this morning. We all got a Hollywood coupon in the mail." Dianne did a pirouette. "So what do you think? Should I go for it? The body rub, the leg wax, the pedicure, the whole bit? Or am I already 'Hollywood' enough?"

Evelyn felt as if somebody had let the air out of her tires. Did this mean that she wasn't actually special after all?

"Well," she snapped, "if you're so darn 'Hollywood' already, you'll just come out looking the same; then, won't you? Except maybe a little more raw and razzed around the edges."

"Oh, I don't know. Mrs. Block says everybody needs a Total once in a while, that even the Hope diamond gets a polish from time to time."

"She said that, did she? Well, I wouldn't take her word for it. You might not come out polished. You might come out looking like you been shoved through the carwash down there at the Gas-O-Hol, all squirted and flushed."

"Now who's acting jealous? Listen. All the girls are talking about trying it. In fact, we were wondering how the place can hope to make any money, hand-

ing out free coupons to every woman in the town."

Evelyn jumped to reestablish her credibility.

"Maybe that's because none of you understands the way high finance works. *I* understand it. The fact of the matter is, Mrs. Block don't actually want to make money. She wants to lose it."

"That's crazy."

"Not in high finance. In high finance crazy is normal, normal is crazy. You're measured by how much you *lose*. Take that Trump. That Donald Trump? Why, he loses millions. He loses more in ten minutes than most people make in ten years. But what people don't know is that he has to lose it. He loses it *on purpose*. That's the way he stays rich!"

At that moment the door burst open and Mrs. Aird came barging in.

"It's a fine state of affairs," the older woman blurted out, drawing deep breaths and falling back against the door jamb for support. She had a deep and injured look. "You go to your police chief to report a suspicious behavior, and try and solve a cold-blooded murder for the man, and does he thank you? Does he even *try* to thank you? No. He takes you and throws you clean out of his office, that's what he does!"

And before Evelyn or Dianne could say a word, she launched into a wild tale about photocopies and signatures and the Hollywood Body Shop and the death of Emmy Gilliam.

He story was totally incredible. Inconceivable. Half the town was lining up to get free Totals, Evelyn herself was on the verge of getting financial advice that might be worth zillions, and along comes this foolish old woman doing everything she can to upset the apple cart. Evelyn was shaking her head before Mrs. Aird had even got the last words out of her mouth. She wasn't going to sit still for this sort of thing, even if Mrs. Block had been less than candid about the free coupons.

"I'm sorry," she said flatly, cutting Mrs. Aird off sharp, "but if you expect us to swallow a story like that, you should have brought something along for show and tell. Chief Robideau was absolutely right."

"But . . ." Mrs. Aird turned helplessly from Evelyn Culver to Dianne Freely and back again.

"No buts," Evelyn said firmly. "You can't run around making those wild accusations!"

"What you're doing," Dianne Freely put in, with a sharp, deprecatory snap of her gum, "is talking slander."

"That's right," Evelyn said.

"Slander. Plain and simple. You need facts, Mrs. Aird . . ."

"But there was no fax, there was only—"

"*Facts!*" echoed Dianne.

" . . . and you got to bring those facts along with you," Evelyn continued, "and slap them down on the table."

"Right on the table," Dianne repeated. She waved a varnished nail vaguely around the room and wound up aiming her finger at the sink.

Mrs. Aird stood back. She straightened her shoulders. Her face was cut by a puzzled, hurt frown, and her gaze swung defensively from one accuser to the other.

"So," she said, "that's how it is. I come in here for years, my hair's good enough, my money's *more* than good enough, but my honest word isn't. That's fine. Thank you very much." She turned and grasped the door handle. "But don't think I don't know where you're coming from. Where you're both coming from. That woman's bought you off with free coupons, lock, stock, and manicure. She's taken nice care of you. But she hasn't taken care of me. No, sir! There aren't enough coupons in her whole darn shop to do that!"

She went out and slammed the door so hard the OPEN/CLOSED sign fell off its suction-cup hook.

Evelyn stepped forward wearily and hung the sign back up. "Good grief! That woman's got her back up higher than a camel with a full load of water."

Dianne bobbed her head in agreement.

"She's right about one thing, though," Evelyn said. "There aren't enough coupons in the darn *country* to take care of her!"

And then Evelyn realized she had stumbled onto a fine excuse to see Mrs. Block and arrange to meet the Genius.

"You know," she said, "I think I just might phone that Hollywood Body Shop and see if she can't take me right away for a Total. Not because I need one or anything, but only to prove to that silly Mrs. Aird that she don't have a clue what she's talking about."

Mrs. Block said she'd be happy to take Evelyn right away, telling her, "Normally I wouldn't be able to, of course, but it turns out I got a cancellation, so I can fit you in real easy, dear." And minutes later, Evelyn was standing in the Hollywood Body Shop, gazing uncertainly at the skimpy white smock Mrs. Block was holding out to her. She hadn't counted on *this*.

"You mean to say I got to take my clothes off? Right off?"

"Well, look at it this way. You

couldn't style my hair too well if I kept my hat on the whole time, could you?"

Mrs. Block showed her teeth, and this time they didn't look as white as Evelyn had first thought. In fact they seemed crooked now, almost snaggly, with brown hairline stains on them where they sprang out of her gums.

"Trust me, dear," she said.

Evelyn went doubtfully into the changing room, wriggled out of her clothes, and got into the smock. She left her things dangling from hooks just inside the door.

"What about my purse?"

"It's safe enough there."

Evelyn hesitated. "One time maybe it would of been. Only now we got this murderer . . ."

"Murderers murder, they don't steal purses."

There was logic in that. In fact, maybe murderers weren't so bad after all. Long as you weren't the one with your name in their job jar.

Mrs. Block showed her into a room that had a cheap padded table in it.

"I don't want no cellulite treatment," Evelyn said, glancing around for anything that looked like it might be a vacuum cleaner.

"We only use creams," Mrs. Block replied. "Just climb up and get comfortable, dear. We'll

start with a facial—even though you don't need it—and then we'll get to the rest of you. We can have a nice chitchat. What would you like to talk about?"

"Well," Evelyn said, "I was wondering about that financial genius you were telling me about. I have a few dollars put away for retirement, and like you told me before, you got to protect yourself nowadays, with the government taxing you left, right, and center."

Nodding agreeably, Mrs. Block brought out her liquids and lotions.

When Evelyn Culver had gone, Coutts came out of the back room, and Mrs. Block told him, "Well, I hope you got an eyeeful."

Coutts leered, then glanced over her shoulder and whistled softly.

"So what do you think? Is she a live one?"

Mrs. Block was inspecting the photocopies Coutts had made in the first three minutes Evelyn Culver had spent on the treatment table, prior to having baby oil smeared all over her: there were copies of her credit cards, her identification, and several nice shots of her bankbook.

"Fifty-seven thousand and change in this account," Mrs. Block said softly. "Who'd of thought it? A woman like her,

in a town like this, who would guess she had that kind of cash squirreled away? Maybe *we* should go into the haircutting business. Only it's quicker to pick apples than grow trees, right?"

"So how do you want to handle her?"

She tapped a pencil against her teeth. "I don't think we'll bother with the forged check bit. And never mind the credit card business. I think this time we'll go straight to the Hong Kong investment opportunity thing."

She moved closer.

"Would you like a rubdown, too, or just what?"

He followed her into the treatment room.

The man Evelyn found on her front step didn't look like a financial genius in spite of his dark blue drip-dry suit and his pin-striped button-down shirt. He looked more like Slow Sid Benson, the man who came around with the machine that he dragged down your cellar and went *whack-whack-whack* with and cleared the tree roots out of your drain—except that Slow Sid wore coveralls with the ca-boose torn out of them. Still, appearances were only skin deep. She ought to know.

When she opened the door, he leaned in, and for a moment she

thought he was actually going to thrust one of his spit-polished size twelve brogues over the sill.

"Evelyn Culver?"

She nodded.

"You don't know me. I got a call from a mutual friend, Eadie Block, last night. About your investment portfolio? She asked me to stop by and give you some advice."

He went on to explain that he'd almost said no, what with all the long-distance phone calls from international bankers and corporate financial analysts badgering him day and night, but since Mrs. Block was a "special lady," and since Evelyn was a personal friend of hers, well, here he was.

Evelyn let him into the house, noticing how his eyes lit up at the sight of the sugar doughnuts on the table.

"So," she said, sitting down, "are you some kind of accountant or something?"

He shook his head no. He said he was a regular guy, blessed with a God-given talent, that was all.

He picked up a doughnut and started to talk.

He talked about "leveraging" and used actual case histories, such as a certain footwear syndicate that had been hobbling along on a shoestring (quick grin) and then one day had sat down to breakfast with him and

was suddenly able to re-shoe the Chinese army. He mentioned a telephony reseller, whatever that was, called Tele-Port, whose stock had shot up to fifty dollars a share from practically nothing after sitting down with him one day for lunch. And he spoke of "a very major" company, which he couldn't identify due to "international sensitivities," whose senior management had been floundering, and had then sat down to dinner with him and had made the Fortune 500 Club practically overnight. Evelyn was swept clean away. The people she sat down to dinner with couldn't even get you into the Rotary Club.

"Think," the Financial Genius said, brushing a litter of sugar granules from his lips and staring at her with glinting, earnest eyes, "if you'd had a piece of McDonald's when it started. Think if you had a chunk of 7-Eleven."

She did think. A few pieces, a few chunks, she might have owned condos all over the world by now.

He told her how he had helped millionaires become billionaires, and billionaires become zillionaires. Billionaires, for example, like Mr. Lee Kai-Shing of Hong Kong.

"Who the heck is he?"

"Richest man in the world, that's all. I started advising him six, eight years ago when all he

owned was a mortgaged paper-lantern company in the New Territories, called Seven Dragons. Now he owns half of Hong Kong, most of Taiwan, and pretty much the very best parts of New York, Paris, and London."

"You're kidding."

"No, ma'am. He also owns chunks of Exxon and great big pieces of the St. Lawrence Seaway."

"I thought the government owned the St. Lawrence Seaway."

"They used to. Now they rent it from him."

"Holy cow!" Evelyn thought a minute, remembering what Mrs. Block had told her, and said, "The poor man must lose a fortune trying to keep himself that rich."

"Huh?"

"Something Mrs. Block said to me. About how when you're rich, you simply got to lose money."

"Oh, right. He certainly does that. He loses a fortune getting out of bed in the morning."

Evelyn shook her head slowly in wonder. "I sure wish I could lose money like that."

The Genius dusted sugar from his long fingers and hitched himself closer to the table. "Now there," he said, showing her a calm, reassuring smile, "is where I just might be able to help you."

*

Then the Genius gave her the scoop.

It seemed that Mr. Lee Kai-Shing, who was the very richest man in the universe, was presently seeking out small investors for a special project. Mr. Kai-Shing had apparently been feeling punk the last while after ignoring the advice of the Genius during lunch and missing out on acquiring a piece or a chunk of the "Chunnel," that hole dug under the water between England and France. He was now determined to correct this error by constructing a second tunnel, far more ambitious, extending all the way from Tokyo to Hong Kong. And, the Genius added, this tunnel was a cinch to make millions because the vehicles running through it would not even have to switch on their engines.

"Why not?" Evelyn asked.

"Because," the Genius said matter-of-factly, consuming the last doughnut, "the earth is curved, right? So a very long tunnel like this one, although perfectly straight, will slope into the ground, won't it? So all you have to do is *coast* through it. Gravity does the work."

"Gosh."

"Mr. Kai-Shing is eager to move on this venture, so if you want to grab, say, a piece or a chunk of it, why that'd make

you a shareholder, wouldn't it? And you'd be entitled to part of the tolls." He frowned sternly. "There's a caveat, though. I have to wire him the money today."

"How come?"

"Because he's in a whole different time zone from us."

"Oh," she said. That was understandable enough.

The Genius didn't even insist on a certified check but accepted a personal check for eight thousand dollars and drove away in a small van that poot-pooted thin blue smoke out the tailpipe. Evelyn tried but couldn't quite remember where she'd heard about a van like that, but gave up, being too excited about the tolls she would one day collect.

Back at the Hollywood, Coutts caught only a fleeting glimpse through his peephole of the girl who worked down at the Easy Clip shrugging deftly back into her clothes.

"Rats," he said.

He waited until he heard the front door close, then went into the front office and thumped the check triumphantly down on the desk. "Eight grand," he announced. "How about that? And I'll get the rest later if I'm careful not to spook her."

But Mrs. Block didn't seem to be listening. She had a harried look. A *terrified* look. Poking worriedly around in the desk,

she glanced up with a frown stitched across her face that was as tight as the binding on a rawhide Indian moccasin.

"Tear it up," she said.

He blinked at her.

"What?"

"Tear up the check! Get rid of it!" She waved her arms around.

"We've been set up. Can you believe it? These hicks have set us up. We're the ones going to get totaled. Slapped in the damn penitentiary—or worse!"

He calmed her down and got her to explain what the heck she was talking about. It seemed she had just discovered that there were important documents missing.

"What documents?"

"Photocopies. What else?" She tossed her head wildly. "It must have been Evelyn Culver!" She jabbed a finger at the check. "She had a motive and an opportunity. She put two and two together, realized what we've been up to, then lured you out there to give you that check. It's probably got some invisible finger dye on it or something. She's probably in cahoots with that dumb police chief. They're probably closing the net on us this minute!"

"But maybe it was somebody else? Like that cleaning woman you hired?"

"She hasn't even been here to clean yet, you dope. She doesn't

start till tonight. Monday, I told her. So it had to of been Culver. That woman's got it in for us!"

She glared at Coutts as if it were all his fault. As if he had put a sign in the window that said: MURDERERS HERE! INQUIRE WITHIN! She said fiercely, "The Gilliam woman was probably a friend of hers. She's why she came here on day one, snooping around. So we've got to get out of here. We've got to leave *now*!"

"And leave the papers?"

Mrs. Block chewed her knuckles.

"No. We'll get those back. I won't rest if we don't. Then we can burn them like we ought to of done in the first place."

She thought a minute. "Get Evelyn Culver on the phone. Try her home and her shop. Tell her you have to see her, that there's a problem with the check or something."

"Then what?"

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"What do you think?" she said.

“O kay. This time I got proof!” Mrs. Aird announced dramatically, whacking a newspaper down on the countertop.

“Good lord,” Evelyn responded, “what’s happened to your hair?”

Mrs. Aird’s head was cloaked

in a ratty hairnet, a few dark tufts jutting out from under it in sharp, shiny spikes.

"Never mind my hair. I've got to treat it myself now, don't I, ever since you threw me out of here!" She thumped the paper. "This article in the *Sun*. See? It's about these ladies in Kenora, and, well, you got to read it."

Evelyn had been sitting alone in the shop waiting for the Financial Genius to arrive, leafing through magazines that seemed to feature Cher or Liz on every second page and wondering what could possibly be wrong with her check. Mrs. Aird had spotted the light in the window and had come barging in. Evelyn wanted to get rid of the woman.

"Won't read it, huh?" Mrs. Aird snapped. "Fine. Then I'll read it for you. It says—" she found the place—"that a woman—several women!—were swindled out of their life savings by a lady in Kenora who ran a *tanning studio*!" Mrs. Aird glanced up. "Did you catch that? A *tanning studio*!" Evelyn squirmed uneasily. "And what they did in this studio was go through a customer's purse when the poor woman was splanged out naked all slathered in suntan lotion!"

Evelyn said, "Well, then, that'd serve them right." She was feeling very uncharitable

towards her own customers these days. "There's no excuse leaving your purse unattended." She remembered her own purse dangling from a hook in the Hollywood and added, "Almost never, anyways."

"The police sur . . . sur . . ."

"Surmise?"

"That's it. That while women were getting their treatments done, their bank statements, credit cards, and all those things were pawed through and photocopied so the crooks would know who to cheat!"

Evelyn's queasiness was becoming more acute. She had a very hollow feeling now down there in the pit of her stomach.

Mrs. Aird said, "I was on my way to the chief to show him this, but when I seen your light on, I decided, after the way he treated me last time, to run the thing by you first. I think Mrs. Block is that crook! I think she may even be a . . ."

She mouthed it silently.

"A what?" Evelyn prompted.

"A *killer*!" This time she shouted it. She brandished the newspaper. "Read it yourself. Prove I'm wrong, and I'll never breathe a word about it ever again."

Evelyn went wearily to the window. It seemed her world was unraveling. Minutes ago she had believed she was embarking on a ride to fabulous

wealth. Now she saw that this was not to be. She saw that she had been played for a fool. Worse yet, these people were apparently criminals. They might even be murderers! Suddenly her eyes focused and flew open wide.

Here came the Genius along the street, and he had Mrs. Block right behind him. Neither one of them looked friendly. Their expressions might have been chipped into their faces with a mallet and a cold chisel.

Mrs. Aird spotted them; too.

"Mercy!" she squealed. "They're after me! Help!" She rushed off to the supply room and slammed the door on herself.

The Financial Genius and Mrs. Block came into the shop. The Genius locked the door and yanked the window curtain down. Mrs. Block was definitely not her usual sweet self. She seemed more like a roller-derby lady who'd been elbow-slammed and wanted to make something out of it. She stopped six inches from Evelyn Culver. "All right," she said, "hand them over. And I don't want to hear any arguments."

"I don't know what you mean," Evelyn said truthfully.

The Genius grabbed her wrists and forced her back into the treatment chair. Frightened and confused, Evelyn whinnied with fear.

Mrs. Block shook a long,

painted fingernail under her nose. "I want what you stole, I want it now, and I won't take no for an answer."

"But I didn't steal anything."

"You did so. I *know* you did. You took some papers. Now, cough them up!"

The Genius gave Evelyn a shake to jog her memory, but it only made her more addled. "Papers? You mean the photocopies?"

"Hah! I knew it!"

"But I never actually saw them. I only heard about them."

"Only heard about them, eh?"

Mrs. Block sneered. "Coutts. This customer wants a beauty treatment. Roll her pantleg up."

"Huh?" Evelyn squeaked. "What?"

The cloth of her roomy white slacks slipped up easily, exposing her knee and her plump right thigh. "What you need, my dear, is a cellulite job," Mrs. Block said. "Only we won't use cream. We'll use something sharp." Evelyn's heart gave a double kick. "Beauty's skin deep," Mrs. Block said, "so we'll go in after that cellulite and strip it away clean, like old wax!"

Evelyn screamed and bucked, trying to escape.

"Hold her *down*!" Mrs. Block barked.

"I'm tryin'."

"And give me your knife."

"I don't have it."

"What?"

"I got rid of it. Just like you told me."

"You moron!"

"You'll have to do the same as last time, I guess. You'll have to bonk her, I suppose."

"What?" Evelyn yelled.

Mrs. Block's hand fumbled along the shelf. It found the hair dryer and closed on it. The Genius's own hands were like steel bands around her wrists, but Evelyn kept struggling, throwing herself in all directions.

Mrs. Block screeched, "*Hold her!*"

"*I am holdin' her.*"

"Sure you are! She's like a trout in a boat!"

"I never took your papers!" Evelyn hollered. "I only heard about them. From Mrs. Aird!"

"Are you telling me," Mrs. Block said venomously, "that silly cleaning lady took them?" The dryer hovered over Evelyn's head. "That's impossible! She couldn't have. She—"

"Is there something you want to say to me?" a quivering but oddly strong voice said from the back of the room.

Turning, they saw Mrs. Aird glaring defiantly out at them. Her hairnet had slipped, revealing a scalp of glistening sharp spikes. Mrs. Block seemed about to explode.

"Well, this caps it! This really

does! We've got an audience now, for crying out loud! Nobody gets out of here alive! You hear me, Coutts?"

"She's gonna bonk me," Evelyn wailed.

"We'll see about that," Mrs. Aird said. She thrust out her jaw and strode boldly for the phone. The Genius jumped at her and tore the phone cord from the wall. He then made a grab for Mrs. Aird, who hooted loudly and rushed for the door. Mrs. Block shoved the waiting room bench into her path with one foot, and Mrs. Aird veered off, going, "Hoo! Hoo! Hoo!"

Mrs. Block had taken over from the Genius, keeping Evelyn pressed down tight in the chair with one hand while her other hand hefted the dryer.

"Can't you *control* that woman?"

"I am controllin' her."

"Sure you are! Like a one-legged zoo man in a monkey cage!"

Mrs. Aird even looked like a monkey. She had clambered up onto a chair and was standing on it, throwing magazines at them. A *Fortune* smacked into the Genius's head. A *Woman's Day* careened off Mrs. Block's ear. "That does it!" Mrs. Block howled, and gave a lunge. Mrs. Aird recoiled, her chair overbalanced, and she fell sideways with a crash. She came down

like an ungainly bird with both elbows jutting out. One elbow clipped the edge of the bench, and the other slammed into Evelyn's five gallon tub of Guy Pierre's European Hair Thickening Formula, sending it over sideways with a loud sucking sound.

A small pink tsunami sluiced over the floor. It swept around Mrs. Aird, who went flat down on her face in it. Mrs. Block quickly backpedaled, but she fell down on her backside. The Genius barked laughter, then he went down, too.

High and dry up on the treatment chair, Evelyn looked down on the bedlam, screaming.

Dianne Freely was saying:

"We can talk about this all day, but I know one thing. If my watch hadn't been ten minutes out, I might not of been passing by when I did, and heard all the hollering, and looked in and found you all humping around like elephant seals, and I wouldn't of run and got Chief Robideau on the double, and Evelyn probably would of been skinned, stuffed, and mounted on that madwoman's wall by now."

Evelyn slapped another handful of hair tonic onto Mrs. Aird's already thickly jellied scalp. "I suppose now you'll hold *that* over me the rest of my natural life. Those two couldn't do noth-

ing—moonwalking every time they got a leg under them. Besides, the chief was already on the case. Pete Melynchuk found the murder weapon in a culvert, and the lab report came back saying Emmy Gilliam had had baby oil smeared on her before she died. It's not like you rescued me."

Dianne's gum snapped. "You say that now when there isn't a madwoman slithering after you. And if it wasn't for me, you'd of gone ahead with that swindle."

"What'd you have to do with it?"

"I took the photocopies."

"It was you that took them?"

"That's right. Which made them tear up your check. I saved you millions."

"I don't have millions."

"You could of made them, though, and then right away lost them again." Dianne bent over Mrs. Aird and said loudly into her ear, "You did all right against those two also, didn't you?"

Mrs. Aird brightened.

"She made me mad, saying it was all my fault because I was deaf as a post and showed up Sunday instead of Monday. And when she said that I was an idiot, well, something snapped. Something just snapped, that's all. So I rowed myself on up to her through the goop and gave her a good one."

Evelyn swung Mrs. Aird's head out over the sink. "You certainly did. With my hair dryer."

"I think that's what fixed it," Dianne said. "You ought to be thankful."

Evelyn sniffed. "Seems I got to thank everyone. I should put a notice in the *Interlake Spectator*. Thank the complete and entire world, and get it over with, once and for all."

"Fix my hair," Mrs. Aird told her, "that'll be thanks enough for me."

"That's what I'm trying to do." Evelyn nodded at the fresh tub

of hair gel on the floor. "I couldn't get any Guy Pierre's, he went out of business—got sued or something—so I'm trying this new stuff: Hong Kong Willie's New Hair Strengthening Solution."

"Just don't slap me with it," Mrs. Aird said. She had her eyes shut tight to keep the gel from leaking into them. "Like I said before about this place, I always get treated like a horse."

"There she goes again," Evelyn muttered. And added: "Just take and shove one of them Irish toffees into her, will you, Dianne?"

SOLUTION TO THE JULY "UNSOLVED":

The resident of Peril Island who caused the shipwrecks was Danny Kraft. The informant, keeper of the eastern lighthouse, was Abe Miller.

	HUSBAND	AGE	WIFE	FARM
WEST	Gustav Latour	43	Elvira	cattle
	1 mile			
	Elmer Jenkins	44	Alice	sheep
	2 miles			
	Fritz Napier	46	Bertha	corn
	2 miles			
	Brett Howard	45	Gilda	oats
EAST	1 mile			
	Danny Kraft	47	Dotty	goats
	2 miles			
	Carlo Inger	41	Fanny	rye
	4 miles			
	Abe Miller	42	Celia	wheat

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the September issue.

Six men, one of them the thief who had lifted the Dubidu diamond, were lined up to clear Customs. Each had a suitcase; no two suitcases were the same color (one was black). All the men came from different states (one from Vermont). One man's name was Fred. Their ages were 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, and 28, and their birthdays occurred in January, February, April, May, June, and September.

(1) Elmo was just behind Carl and just ahead of Andy. The three included the man from Wyoming, the one with the tan suitcase, and the 22-year-old. Mr. Jules was not among them.

(2) The man from South Carolina stood just behind the one whose birthday fell in September and just ahead of Bert. Their last names (not necessarily in order) were Irish, Kline, and Lamar.

(3) Mr. Kline is three years older than the man with the gray suitcase. The man whose birthday is in February (who is not Mr. Kline) is three years older than Carl.

(4) The man with the blue suitcase was just behind the 26-year-old and just ahead of the one born in June. The three were from South Carolina, Utah, and Texas (in one order or another).

(5) Carl's birthday comes three months after that of the man with the brown suitcase; Mr. Jules's birthday is three months after that of the 27-year-old; the man from Utah's birthday is three months after Mr. Lamar's. These include all the men in line.

(6) Andy is two years older than the man with the maroon suitcase and two years younger than the man from Tennessee (who was not first in line).

(7) Dave is not from South Carolina.

(8) Mr. Hanks was not born in January.

Each man (including Mr. Grant) was asked to open his bag. Inspector Ledoux's experienced fingers detected a suspicious bulge in the lining of the black suitcase. Applying his penknife, he triumphantly held up the stolen Dubidu diamond.

Who stole the diamond?

FICTION

BLUE DEVILS

James Sallis

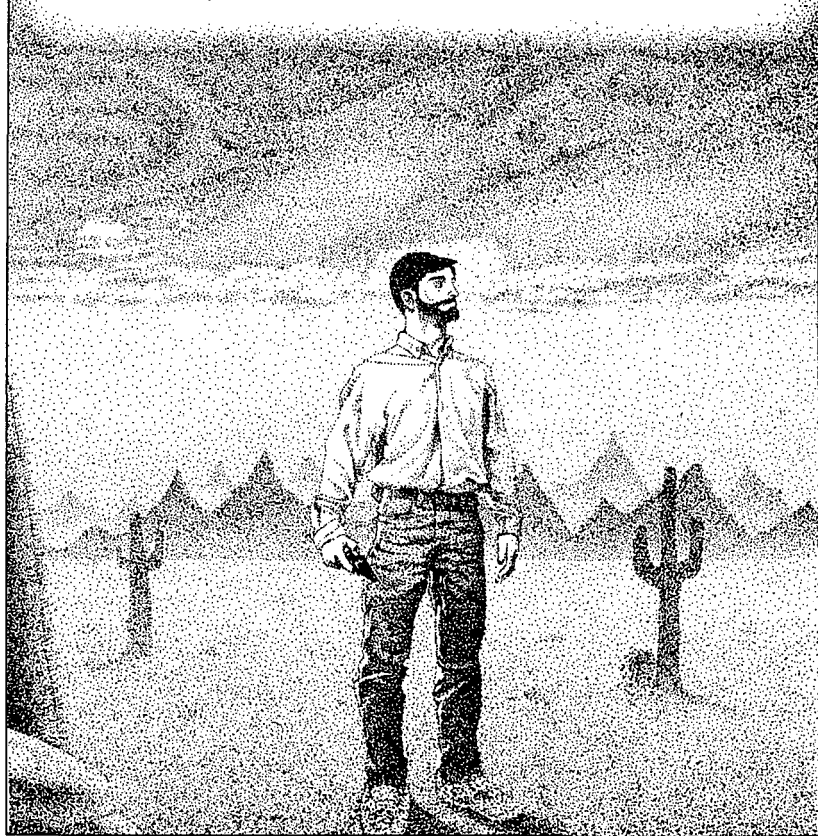


Illustration by David Monette

111
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 8/96

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

All the way up from El Paso, which is where you first start noticing how much *sky* there is, the image stays with me. I've managed to shut it away for a long time, but now, maybe because we're on the spoor, getting close, it comes back. I look up at a cloud the size of Idaho, and there it is. At a mountain rising from the ground like a fist polished smooth: there, too. And in cholla and scrub cactus at the side of the road.

"I could definitely use a beer about now. You could probably do with a break, too. Unless you feel the need to push on, that is."

I look over at him. What he's said is slow to register. The world comes to me these days in a kind of stutter, like the time delay on radio talk shows.

"Maybe we could grab something to go?" I'm dry myself, from looking out at this landscape as much as for any other reason.

He nods once, eyes straight ahead as always. Both hands are loosely on the wheel, left elbow a buttress in the window. At the next exit he swings off into a service plaza larger than many of the Southern towns I grew up in. My father was career military, outspoken enough at the incompetencies and inefficiencies involved that he was repeatedly transferred. I counted

once: eleven high schools. Maybe that's why I myself have always had such respect for authority. But it could have gone either way.

He fills up, goes inside to pay, and comes out with a six-pack of Heineken and the Slice I asked for. Back on the road he pops one of the beers and sips at it for the next thirty miles. The rest are tucked away under his legs. The two of us, the Slice, and the beer bottles just about fill the little Miata.

Flies.

The sound of them was what I always remembered, always thought of. Then Sergeant Van Zandt's voice at last penetrating. How many times has he already asked?

You okay, Mr. Gorman?

I nodded, said could I see her.

Well, generally . . . He stopped. Motioned with one hand for attendants to uncover her. A plain, somewhat muscular woman herself not much older than Faith folded back a corner, watching me closely the whole time. I nodded, and she put the cover back in place.

It's Faith, then. It's your daughter, Van Zandt said.

Yes.

"You understand that we can't do anything here," Delany says. I lurch back up into the world as it is. "There's no outstanding warrant, which se-

verely limits the scope of my actions."

I went to him because of his reputation as a bounty hunter.

"So here's what we do. We go in, have a look, poke through the ashes of the campfire. We find something, anything at all, then we ask the locals to step in. You okay with that?"

I nod. I see my daughter's face below me, shimmering in heat that rises off the asphalt. An eye is gone. Ear and scalp are torn away on that side.

Delany pulls out another beer, drops the empty bottle back in the pack.

We're coming into the Chiricahuas, mountains unlike any others I know, ghostly somehow, the whole range eroded by wind, water, and time to skull-like stands of stone honeycombed with caves and unlikely passages where Cochise eluded all pursuers.

Farther on, past Tucson, reservation lands lie slumbering to every horizon, cluttered briefly by trailers or tarpaper shacks, rusting automobiles and appliances, propane tanks.

"Unless you want to cancel all that and just blow him away, of course," Delany says.

He was, I was told, the best in the state at finding people—the best, period. That information came almost a year after Faith's

death, on my last visit to Van Zandt's cubicle tucked away on the fourth floor behind rows of filing cabinets that looked as though cars had been driven repeatedly into them.

"There's just not much else I can do for you, Mr. Gorman," Van Zandt said. "The case remains open, of course. We don't officially close homicides. And bulletins will stay in circulation—till they're crowded out by new ones, at least. You never know. Sometimes things fall into our lap when we least expect it. Meanwhile, you might want to consider giving this man a call. I'm not telling you this as a cop, of course. I have a daughter myself."

He slid a business card across the desk to me with two crooked fingers, tapped it once with the index, and let go.

"He's a detective. Specializes in finding people, and he's damned good at it. Lots, including some who do the same kind of work, say there's no one better."

I looked down at the card. Buff-colored, almost translucent parchment. And engraved: not thermography. Just SEAN DELANY and a phone number.

Brought up on cheap detective movies and hardboiled novels, despite the card I'd half expected to find Delany in some gin mill with a cigarette hanging

out one side of his mouth and a madeover blonde on the other arm, with eyes like bad sunsets and a tie that doubled as napkin. Instead, by way of his answering service and a secretary who called back immediately, I found him at Geronimo's, a mid-city health club. He was finishing up a set of handball, had a thing or two to talk over with the investment counselor who'd been his opponent, and would see me outside in five minutes if that was all right.

We met at his car, a British-green Miata. He had traded sweatshirt and shorts for a full-cut cotton suit like the ones Haspel used to make down in New Orleans and wore a knit, alligatorless shirt beneath. At a mall nearby he ordered felaful from a Greek fast-food stall, and I had three coffees as we talked.

What do you do, Mr. Gorman? he asked at one point.

I'm an architect. I build things.

We talked a while longer, and he agreed to help me.

From the first I've been won over by Delany's quiet-spoken, self-assured, ever-so-civilized manner. But now as we move ever farther from the city—into the scruffy hills and scrubland of West Texas, through ancient, barren New Mexico, and on into Arizona, growth like bright

green veins in runnels formed by water washing down mountainsides—I can't help but notice how that's begun changing. Simple things, at first: endings dropped from a word here or there, rougher cadences. Then articles and conjugations drop out, leaving behind a language all nouns, present-tense verbs, prepositions. The man with whom I get out of the car in Tucson seems not at all the one with whom I began the trip back in Fort Worth.

"It doesn't have anything to do with justice or finding the person responsible," Chris said to me a few nights before. We'd met for coffee at a carefully neutral restaurant. She came directly from work; I, now unemployed, from the one room apartment I'd finally settled into after months of motel rooms. "Don't you see that? That's why I left, why I had to. It's the *world* you want to hurt now, Joe. You want to hear it scream, want to tear something away from it, want to hurt it as much as it's hurt you."

Hurt? No. What I feel is numb. What I feel is nothing. I look out at the world and don't recognize, don't register, what's there. Only with effort, in a kind of forced gulp, will my mind take it in.

"Welcome to Tucson," Delany says.

The city has come surreptitiously up around us and now seems to go on forever, sprawling across this treeless, light-struck landscape. Distinctive mountain ranges stand at each point of the compass. A map names them for me: Catalina, Santa Rita, Rincon, Tucson. We drive along something called the Speedway past The Bashful Bandit, Empress Theater and Book Store XXX, Weinerschnitzel. Past bars, fast-food emporiums, video shops, used-car lots, hardware and auto-parts stores.

"The Miracle Mile," Delany says. "But most people around here just call it the Armpit." Pickup trucks with bodies rusted wholly through in moldlike patches overtake us, leave us behind. "Place we're looking for's up ahead a little ways."

He pulls into the parking lot of a motel that looks as though it might have been built early in the fifties when such things were novelties. It's set back off the road half a lot or so. The wooden sign is shaped like a palm tree, with the legend REFRIGERATED AIR and its name, NO-TEL MOTEL, painted on.

"Room fourteen," Delany tells me.

It's on the second tier. Inside, a TV plays loudly: sirens, brakes screaming, metal slamming into metal.

"We're in luck." He knocks.

"Yeah?"

"Maintenance. Sorry to bother you, but we've got a major water leak downstairs. Have to check it out. Take us a minute or two, tops."

"Hang on."

Nothing for a time—Delany and I exchange glances—then the door opens a couple of inches, and a slat of face shows in the crack. Sharp, finlike nose, small mouth, drooping eyelid. Day's growth of beard.

He takes in Delany's clothes.

"Hell, man, you ain't—"

But Delany ducks his shoulder into the door, hard, and keeps going.

The man inside staggers back out of the way as the door slams against the wall. He reaches for the rear pocket of his jeans. Delany is there. Stomps down on his instep and, when he bends forward over the pain, pivots behind him on one foot, grabbing his long hair in a fist. The man's eyes round as Delany's hand tightens.

"Be nice," Delany tells him. "Man needs to talk to you."

I step inside and shut the door.

Wary, expressionless eyes follow me.

Delany pulls a gun out of the man's back pocket and hands it to me.

"Your call," he says, stepping off to the side.

So I shoot him.

Delany lets go of the hair as the man goes down. When he tries to breathe, air whistles out of his chest. He puts a hand gently against himself as if to hold the air in, says *Shit* with an even louder whistle, and is still. I notice there's no difference in the eyes.

"Cops be here in six minutes tops," Delany says.

He's standing by the bedside table looking through things piled up there, magazines, a cheap plastic wallet, stray bills and change, a couple of envelopes.

"But we got us another problem," he tells me.

"Yeah?"

"Wrong bird."

I look at him.

"This wasn't your man." He holds up a folded paper from one of the envelopes. "Gentleman here's freshly laundered, just out of the joint. Been a guest of the state almost three years."

"But how . . ."

He shrugs. "Information's what you make of it. I thought we had a fit. Sometimes it doesn't work out right. Sometimes it does."

Delany takes the gun from me, wipes it with his handkerchief, and puts it in the dead man's

hand. He presses the hand hard against the grip, feeds the forefinger into the trigger guard.

"Thing is," he says, "does it matter?"

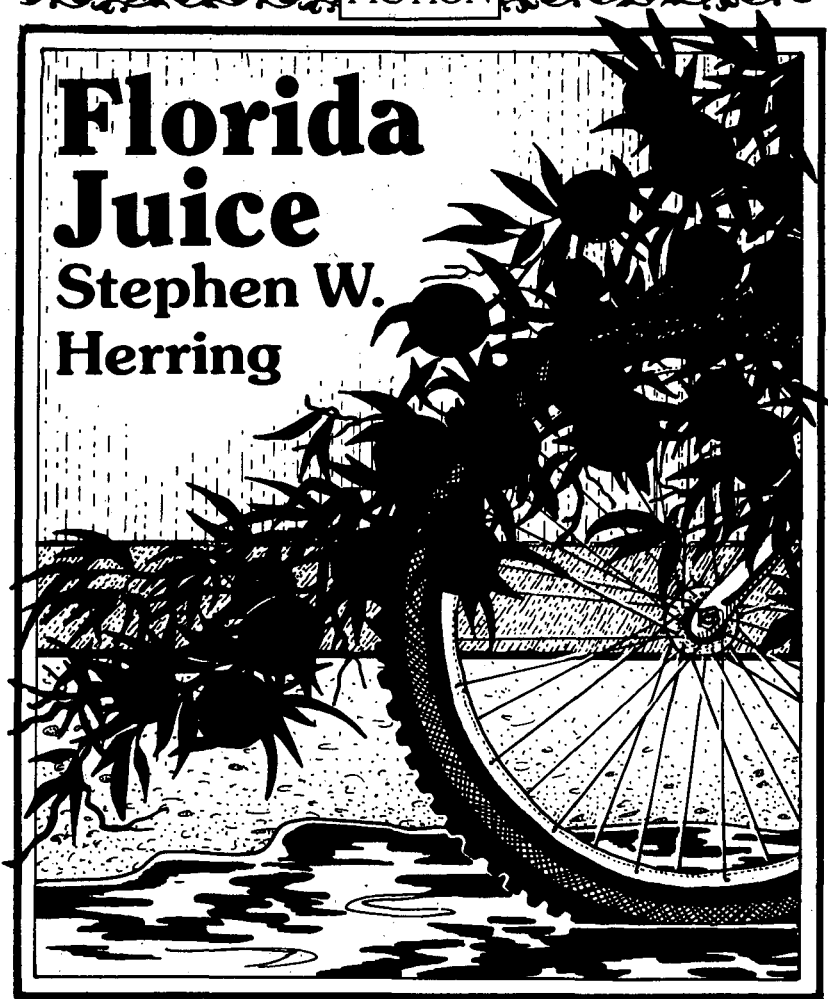
And I realize that it doesn't. That it doesn't matter at all. Someone's paid. A life's been taken. That's what matters. Maybe I understood all along, understood without knowing I understood, that this was the best I could hope for. Maybe Delany knew that, too.

We go down the back stairs, get in the Miata, and pull away, north on Oracle to West Miracle Mile, then due west till we jump I-10, hearing sirens build to a scream behind us. I watch the Catalina mountains, the Tucson mountains, all this sky. Everything bright and alive, sharply defined, in the noonday sun. I can go back to building things now.

Later I look up again at the Chiricahuas and think how little we've changed. We huddle together in the vertical caverns of our cities, around our megawatt campfires, and try to fill up the darkness with chants, songs, magic. We understand so little, we're always afraid, and sometimes still, the best we can do is offer up a sacrifice—hoping to drive out whatever blue devils overtake us.

Florida Juice

Stephen W.
Herring



In May the temperature in southwest Florida can easily hit the nineties during the peak heat of the afternoon. That's when the retirees and homemakers head inside to the air-conditioned comfort of their houses and condos, and that was when Frank Jessup was most likely to come prowling around.

It was on just such a day late in May that Frank Jessup in his battered green pickup truck was prowling the streets of Edgewood,

looking for easy pickings. Edgewood was an older section of one of those planned community developments in Florida that date back to the 1950's. The houses there were very much the same: slab ranches with stucco walls, tile roofs, and an open carport instead of a garage. It was those carports that brought Frank Jessup snooping.


The pickup had a bogus landscape company name on its doors to satisfy curious neighbors. It moved slowly along a street called Cypress Circle as if the driver were looking for the address of a client. Actually, he was checking out the carports, looking for the forlorn ten-speed that somebody forgot to store or lock up. Frank Jessup was a professional bike thief. He lined up his marks cautiously, and when he hit, it was quick and smooth. Then he would not do the same neighborhood again for months.

He spotted a nice lemon yellow job in the carport at 2304 Cypress Circle. It was propped against the house, where there was nothing to chain it to. If it was chained to itself, it would be no problem for a thief with his own wheels. Jessup memorized the address and drove by. He had learned the tricks of the bike game after forty years of bungled burglaries and botched car thefts that left him with a long rap sheet and a dozen years behind bars. He tried to go straight once. For a couple of years he tended bar at a lounge in Vero Beach. He actually gained somewhat of a reputation for his piña colodas. But that cash register sitting on the end of the bar proved too strong a temptation. He was caught, did a stretch of eighteen months, and swore off the straight life as unnatural and demeaning.

In the bike game he had found an easy and graceful way to slide into his retirement years. He didn't have to mess with electronic ignitions or the fancy security systems everyone was putting in their houses. At sixty he was still as lean and tough as he had ever been. He looked younger, there being no gray hairs on his slick bald head to betray his age. But he was tired, and he wanted to spend more time strumming his beloved banjo. And he wanted to stop looking over his shoulder all the time for the law.

By the time he had covered all the streets of Edgewood, Jessup had the addresses of three candidates tucked in the back of his mind. Three houses had decent looking ten-speed bikes in their carports with no car in sight. Back on Cypress Circle the lemon yellow bike at 2304 was still there. The sun-baked street was quiet and clear of traffic. It was a go.

He backed into the drive, right up to the carport. He had done it a



hundred times: leave the motor running, get the bike and lay it flat in the truck in one smooth motion, then get the hell out of there—not too fast. This time as he approached the bike he noticed it was standing in a wide puddle of water. Probably a leaking air-conditioner condenser, he thought. He moved quickly, not noticing the copper wires wrapped around two places on the bike frame, not noticing how the wires snaked along the frame like ordinary brake cables until they disappeared into a small hole in the stucco wall.

When Frank Jessup grabbed the lemon yellow bike, several neighbors heard a strange hum and a shriek that ended almost as soon as it began. In a neighborhood familiar with children's shouts and screeching brakes, the odd noise was quickly dismissed, and the neighbors returned to their TV soap operas and their crossword puzzles.

Deputy Sheriff Clay Briscoe pulled his Palmetto County cruiser up behind the abandoned green pickup. It was parked on the gravel shoulder of Armadillo Drive, a lonely road lined with empty lots overgrown with saw grass and scrub pines. Armadillo Drive was in an undeveloped section of the sprawling community, but a few houses had been built, the hardy owners having put in their own wells and septic tanks. One of those pioneers had complained to the sheriff's department that an old heap of a pickup truck had been creating an eyesore in his neighborhood for the past three weeks.

Deputy Briscoe sized up the situation carefully. He was wary of pickup trucks. They often had gun racks, and where there's an empty gun rack, there could be someone with a rifle or shotgun nearby. He called in the plate number to Deputy Earl Baker, dispatcher at the Southeast District substation, and told him he was proceeding to investigate.

No gun rack, thank goodness. Old piece of rug in the back of the truck. On the doors was lettered JOHNSON'S LANDSCAPING, but there was no telephone number. Suspicious. Doors were unlocked, but no keys in the ignition. The glove compartment held only tools and rags.

Briscoe wondered if he should plunge into the deep grass to look for signs of recent trampling or maybe dragging. The late morning temperature was getting well into the eighties, and the cool blue vinyl interior of his air-conditioned cruiser beckoned. Clay Briscoe was a beefy ex-Detroit cop who had little use for heat and humidity.

ty. When he became a widower at the age of forty, he took an early retirement deal and fled south more for bass and tarpon fishing than the subtropical climate.

He mopped the sweat that had been beading on his face and forced himself into the thick brush. Satisfied that the underbrush had not been molested by the foot or carcass of man, he turned to head back to his cruiser. As he turned, a glint of reflected sunlight caught his eye. Wading deeper into the weedy lot, he found a set of keys caught on a low pine branch. He used one of the keys to crank up the green pickup's asthmatic engine. Someone had thrown the keys far into the lot. Very suspicious.

One of Deputy Sheriff Earl Baker's qualifications for the job of substation dispatcher was that his three hundred pound girth did not permit him to move in and out of a county cruiser with the grace and speed expected of one of Palmetto County's finest. He sat instead at the nerve center of the Southeast District, dispatching calls, coordinating schedules, collecting information, gossip, and recipes. He was also the senior man of the day shift, which made him captain of the watch more often than not.


Clay Briscoe sat down at the dispatcher's desk, listening to Deputy Baker work a call: "That's right, ma'am, just leave him be and don't worry about it. . . . No, ma'am, we can't send out a deputy if a gator decides to take some sun on the bike path—it's part of his natural habitat. . . . I'm sorry, ma'am. . . . Okay, ma'am, you just have yourself a good day now."

Earl Baker switched off the call and shoved his roller chair toward Briscoe, his headset still clamped on. "Let's see, abandoned truck on Armadillo Drive," he said, picking up a case folder he had just set up. "Computer says that license belongs to one Francis R. Jessup, alias Frank Johnson, alias Frank Fisher, known to his cohorts as Fumble Fingers Frank. Sixty. Got a long and sorry record, I'm sad to say. Thief. Not much action recently. Questioned a couple of times about snatching bicycles, but no arrests. The word on the street is that he's in the bike game now but playing it very low key, just to cover his expenses."

"Live in town?" Briscoe asked.

"No. He's got a trailer over on Route 19 near Endino."

Deputy Briscoe held up the keys he had found. "These were thrown into the brush near the truck," he said. "One of them is the ignition key. And there wasn't a scrap of personal paper in the



cab—no registration, receipts, nothing. It's looking like foul play to me, Earl."

"Foul play is exactly what I'm thinking, my boy," said Earl Baker, "but my informants are not being very helpful. There was no word out to get Jessup; he didn't have enemies in the game; they don't know where he is. It looks like we have ourselves a case here, and every case we solve without having to call in the state police detectives is another feather in our cap. And by the way, I have another clue for you," he said with a sly smile. He took a bulky Kraft envelope from a box and dumped out a well-worn wallet. "It's Jessup's," he said proudly.

"Where in blazes did you get this?" demanded Briscoe, examining the brown leather billfold, noticing its empty cash compartment.

Earl Baker chuckled. "Had it for two weeks," he said. "Been in my lost-and-found bin. I've called his number four or five times and never got an answer. Now I guess I know why. Came from Landfill Larry."

"So someone put it in the trash?"

"That's what it looks like, my boy," said the dispatcher. A sudden chirping sound alerted him to an incoming call, and he rolled himself back to the console to take it.

Landfill Larry was the sheriff's department's unofficial scavenger, an ancient geezer who lived in a shack at the county landfill. He was allowed to stay there and pick through the mounds of trash that arrived daily as long as he turned in anything that might help law enforcement do its job. Landfill Larry had found guns used in crimes, drug caches, and on one occasion a human leg, which turned out to be an improperly disposed of product of the county hospital.

Larry often came up with purses and wallets containing identification. They never contained cash by the time they reached Earl Baker, and Baker did not know nor care if Larry had helped himself along the way. Clay Briscoe pulled the laminated driver's license from the wallet and studied the lean, weathered face of Frank Jessup in the postage-stamp photo. He wrote down the particulars of address, height, eye color, and birthdate.

When Deputy Baker finished the call, Briscoe said, "If it's foul play, I don't think it happened out at Armadillo. As far as I'm concerned, you can have the truck towed to the pound. Later on, if we have to, we can get a dog out there to sniff around. But that would mean calling in our friends in the state police."

"No rush to do that, my boy," Earl Baker said judiciously. "I'll

have the truck hauled out of there and get the neighbors off my neck, and you can check out Jessup's place. Deal?"

"Deal," said Deputy Briscoe as he retrieved Frank Jessup's keys.

Frank Jessup's trailer was set back from Route 19 in a secluded grove of mossy oaks. Deputy Briscoe used one of Jessup's keys to enter the trailer and look around. He found only clues of the negative kind: no forced entry, no signs of a struggle, no ransacking; and there were items of value that could have been taken but were not. A nice tenor banjo with silver fittings was in plain view.

Whatever had happened to Frank Jessup had not happened here.

The county cruiser moved slowly into the landfill, causing the gulls to rise up from the heaps of stinking garbage in noisy clouds, vehemently protesting the intrusion. Briscoe soon found Landfill Larry's shack, a discarded garden shed made of particle board and slats. It was perched on a piece of solid ground overlooking acres of shifting and settling refuse, like a hammock hill in a swamp. The deputy had no intention of seeking Larry out in that quagmire, so he waited, hoping that the message relayed via Earl Baker to the sanitation trucks had got through.


Landfill Larry must have seen the cruiser enter the landfill. He emerged from his happy hunting grounds just as Briscoe pulled up to the shack. Larry looked like Gandhi in dungarees: skin baked to a reddish brown, a smooth head except for some white fuzz, spindly arms and legs. "You want to see me, deputy?" Larry said, peering into the cruiser window with a gaping smile displaying all three of his teeth.

"Larry, you remember finding this a couple of weeks ago?" asked the deputy, holding up Frank Jessup's wallet to show the driver's license mounted inside.

"Yep, but there weren't a single dollar in her when I found her."

"That's okay, Larry, I just want to know if you remember the load you picked it from—you know, what route it might have come from."

"Sure do. That's my job. I'm a paid informer," Larry said proudly, but with emphasis on the "paid." Clay Briscoe passed him a five dollar bill. Landfill Larry scratched his head and said, "It was where number sixty-eight is unloading these days, and it was a Tuesday I'm sure. On Tuesdays, sixty-eight does Edgewood. Does that help, deputy?"



"Sure does," said the deputy sheriff, quickly powering up the window so the air conditioning could cool and purify the hot, rancid air that had drifted in.

Edgewood was not a likely place for anyone to run into foul play. But whoever had taken Frank Jessup's wallet had tossed it out in Edgewood, a residential neighborhood with no stores and no public trash receptacles.

It was getting close to noon, and Briscoe wondered if the stench from the landfill was going to take away his appetite for lunch. But by the time he got off the interstate seven miles away he found that he was ready to stop at his favorite restaurant—a Perkins—and order his usual: a Swiss melt on rye with fries and iced tea, plus a garden salad to ease the guilt.

He worked on his lunch in a booth where he could keep an eye on the cruiser while thinking about how he was going to pinpoint just where in Edgewood, a subdivision of at least two hundred houses, Frank Jessup's wallet came from. By the time he had finished his meal with a slice of key lime pie, he had a plan worked out.

Back at the substation Deputy Briscoe collected a computer print-out of all the call logs from the past year and a big rolled property map of the Edgewood subdivision, then headed for the interrogation room. On the way he stopped at his desk and picked up a large bag of Red Hots, his favorite candy, that was stashed in a lower drawer. He unrolled the Edgewood map on the large interrogation room table, dumped out a pile of candy, and started plowing through the log.

The map showed property lines, the outlines of all buildings, and the street numbers on each lot. For every call that had come from an Edgewood address and involved some form of violence or the threat of violence, Briscoe put one of the little red candies on the map lot for that address. It was low technology, but it provided for an occasional sugar boost as the tedious work wore on.

As it turned out, he didn't need many Red Hots for the map. After two hours of scanning, looking up some addresses he wasn't sure of, and pulling the complaint forms for some calls that were poorly described in the log, he had used only twelve. Enough, however, to create an interesting pattern: five Red Hots were clustered in one area on Cypress Circle.

It was an odd pattern because the five candies appeared on the properties surrounding one lot, but that lot had none. The number

on the clear lot—2304—did ring a bell with the deputy. It was in the log, but he had passed over it because the call did not involve violence. Briscoe went back to the printout and found the entry for 2304 Cypress Circle: bicycle theft, reported by one Gary Burns about two months ago.

Going back over the complaints from the surrounding properties, he saw that they all involved threats, altercations, or acts of vandalism related to disputes with a neighbor. He had to pull and read all five complaint forms to realize that each dispute involved the same neighbor, Gary Burns of 2304 Cypress Circle. None of the complaints had led to an arrest. No charges were filed except in one case, but those charges were dropped. The latest complaint against Gary Burns was filed just two days after Burns had reported the theft of his bicycle. It came from an Arthur Norris, described by the deputy who filled out the form as a "retired gentleman." Deputy Briscoe took the form to his desk and dialed the complainant's number. Mr. Norris was at home.

"Sir, Deputy Sheriff Clay Briscoe calling, just following up on some complaints in your neighborhood regarding a Mr. Burns who I believe is your next door neighbor."

"Well, I made out a complaint a couple of months ago, but I wish I hadn't," said a wary, wavery voice.

"Are you still having trouble with Mr. Burns, sir?"

"No, thank goodness. I haven't seen him or his car for weeks now."

"Mr. Norris, the notes on your complaint form aren't very clear. I wonder if you would mind telling me what happened in your own words."

The question opened a floodgate. "That Gary Burns has been trouble from the day he and his mother moved in," Arthur Norris said in exasperation. "Always picking fights over property lines or over the fruit from the orange trees, and accusing people of spying on him. Why anyone would want to spy on him is beyond me. Anyway, one day he comes up to me saying someone stole his bicycle, wanting to search my house in case I took the damn thing. Well, I made the mistake of telling him he was crazy. He just stalked off, but the next day one of my car's tires had been slashed. My carport is just across from his, so it would be very easy for him to do it. I called the police and gave my report. I know he did it, but no proof, of course. The deputy talked to Burns, and the next day the other tires were slashed. So I just shut up about it and didn't take it any further."

“Did he ever strike you or threaten you personally?” Briscoe asked.

“No, that’s not his way. I know his type, I’ve seen it before: a coward, that’s what Gary Burns is.” Arthur Norris’s voice was now strong and clear. “He’ll wait and get you when your back is turned. He’s got a bumper sticker on his car says it all: I DON’T GET MAD—I GET EVEN. If you ask me, I think he’s mental, if you know what I mean.”

Deputy Briscoe courteously brought the call to an end before Mr. Norris could get his second wind. He had settled on Gary Burns as his prime suspect in the disappearance of Frank Jessup. But before he could proceed, he needed more information, which meant he would have to consult the county’s most comprehensive data bank: Deputy Earl Baker.

Baker was holding court at the dispatcher’s console, dictating his famous chili recipe to a young deputy who was seeking to impress his fiancée. Turning to Deputy Briscoe he said, “We should pass a law making it mandatory for my Royal Palm Chili to be served in all the public schools of Palmetto County. Just eating it teaches discipline, tolerance, and respect for the Creator of All Things.”

“I’ve had your chili, Earl, and it taught me how to run fast,” Clay Briscoe cracked.

“It’s good for athletic development, too,” Earl Baker agreed. “Come up with anything on that Jessup business?”

“I don’t know what the crime is, exactly, but I have a suspect. I was wondering if the name had ever passed through that over-worked gossip mill in your head. Gary Burns. Lives on Cypress Circle in Edgewood. The files don’t show any record on him.”

Earl Baker’s face sagged a bit into his jowls. “I’m afraid it’s just a matter of time, my boy, just a matter of time. He’s got a juvenile record. Arson. Back in Knoxville where him and his mama come from. A troubled kid, broken home, very sad. The mother, Grace Burns, works as a maid at one of the big motels at the interchange. Gary works construction jobs; carpentry mostly. But he can’t hold onto any job for long. Hotheaded. He’ll get in an argument, then there’ll be some sabotage on the work site and he’ll be fired.”

Surprised by the flow of information, Briscoe said, “What do you use to find out all this stuff, ESP?”

The dispatcher laced his fingers across the wide expanse of his belly, leaned back, and said, “Don’t need any ESP. The social work-

er on the Burns case is my wife's cousin. My wife has three brothers, four sisters, and two dozen cousins, not to mention countless aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. Through them I've got this district covered from top to bottom. A wife can be a very handy thing, Clay. You should give it another try."

Slightly embarrassed, Clay Briscoe said, "Well, marriage can have its down side, too."

"Thanksgiving time can be hell," Baker admitted. "But it's worth it. And just to prove it, I'll get an update on your case right now." He turned to the console and pushed a well-worn button that connected him within seconds with Mrs. Earl Baker. "Darlin', it's me," he said into the tiny mike on his headset. "What's the latest on cousin Doris's work with the Burns family over in Edgewood? . . . Oh, really? . . . Yes, I see. Thanks a bunch, darlin'. My vote is for meatloaf tonight, okay? . . . 'Bye." He rolled back to Deputy Briscoe, eyebrows arched high. "According to cousin Doris, Mrs. Burns hasn't been seeing anyone and hasn't been working for three weeks. Maybe someone should go out there and check on her."

"I'm on my way," said Deputy Briscoe.

An old blue Chevette was sitting in the carport at 2304 Cypress Circle. Clay Briscoe parked his cruiser in the driveway behind it. The afternoon heat was building up, but a dark rim of clouds to the west promised a thundershower within an hour or two.

The door was opened by a bulky woman in a faded floral house-dress. She was in her late fifties, her hair an unkempt shock of gray and white. She was very short, but her thick neck and meaty arms projected a tough, no-nonsense presence.

"Mrs. Burns, I'm Deputy Briscoe from the sheriff's office, and I need to talk to you about your son." Briscoe prayed that the woman would grant him speedy refuge from the oppressive heat.

"You'd better come in, then," she said with a grunt.

Briscoe entered a deliciously air-conditioned living room with pastel green walls and very little furniture. All there was was a large TV set sitting close to an overstuffed blue recliner and a well-stocked liquor cart in a corner. A heavy scent of orange blossoms filled the room. Finding himself at least fourteen inches taller than the woman, he asked if they could sit at the table in the adjacent dining room. "Suit yourself," she said. "Is Gary in some kind of trouble?"

"At this time, Mrs. Burns, we would just like to talk to him."

“He run off on me three weeks ago,” she said. “We had an argument over his not being able to hold onto a job, and he said all the contractors around here had it in for him so he had to look for work where they don’t know him.”

“Do you know where he went looking for work?”

“He said he was going to try over around Homestead, where there’s still Hurricane Andrew work going on.”

“Your son reported a bicycle theft a couple of months ago. I’m sorry to say we have not recovered the bicycle, but I was wondering if he might have tried to go after the thief himself. Did he mention anything like that to you?” Briscoe asked.

Grace Burns started to fidget. Looking down into her lap she said, “That’s what started it all. He was real upset over it. He went out and bought a new bike—a nice yellow one—but he was too upset to work. He stayed in his room all day while I was at work. Then we had a big fight over his not working; gave me heart palpitations. He took off, and I’ve been too sick to work ever since.” She took a crumpled tissue from a pocket and dabbed at tears that Clay Briscoe could not see.

“Has he called or written?” he asked.

“No, and I don’t expect him to. He’s not the type. He’ll get thrown off a job, run out of money, then come running back to mama. I’m not worried about him.”

“Would you mind if I took a look around his room, ma’am?” Briscoe asked cautiously.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind, sir, and I want to cooperate with you all I can, but I’d really like to check with a lawyer friend of mine before I give permission. Hope you don’t mind,” Grace Burns said with a shrug of helplessness.

Briscoe knew a lawyer would never advise a warrantless search, and he knew he didn’t have the evidence to go before the judge and get a warrant. He also knew that he was playing a game with a woman who was cleverer than she looked. But her story about her son’s leaving was inconsistent: did they fight because he kept getting fired, or because he wouldn’t go out and find a job? Heart palpitations? He’d like to see medical proof, but that too would be hard to get.

He had no body, no blood, no weapon, no one to file a missing persons report. Frank Jessup might have simply abandoned his trailer and truck for a new identity and a new life. Career criminals had done it before. He would need more evidence; maybe the state police

would help. He would have to talk it over with Earl Baker, but Grace Burns was looking more and more like a dead end.

The sheriff's deputy thanked Mrs. Burns for her help and left her in her small stucco house on Cypress Circle. She watched his cruiser pull out of the driveway and disappear around the corner. "You can come out now!" she bellowed.

She dropped into her plush recliner and pushed it back to a comfortable angle. A bedroom door slowly opened, and a skinny man wandered into the living room, bandages on the parts of his hands that had not yet healed. Frank Jessup had also suffered mentally from the jolt he'd received when he'd attempted to lift Gary Burns's new yellow ten-speed. Dazed and disoriented, he was easily manipulated by the woman who had been keeping him prisoner the past three weeks.

"That was the *fuzz*, Frank," she announced from her velvety throne. "I could have turned you in so easy, but I didn't, did I! Cause then you'd have to go back to jail, wouldn't you!"

"No jail," Frank mumbled.

"That's right, Frank, no jail. You're staying here with *me* now, aren't you, Frank?"

"Gary," Frank whispered fearfully.

"Now, don't you go worrying yourself over that bum! We'll never see *him* again. He thinks he killed you," she said. "When I came home that day, I thought you were dead, too. You would have been killed if he hadn't shut off the juice when he did. The vengeful idiot! He dumped your truck someplace and took off."

"You said he'll come back," said Frank Jessup, who had been listening at the bedroom door.

"He won't. Last time he called, I told him the cops were watching for him. I said they were going to put a tap on the phone. He can't come back, and he can't call any more. I'm free of that Looney Tune son of mine, and I got you as a bonus, you lucky devil!"

Frank Jessup looked at the four walls surrounding him and tried to understand the difference between that house and jail. He couldn't.

"Now, Frank," Grace Burns grinned, pointing to the liquor cart, "why don't you make us one of your famous piña coladas."

FICTION

MISSING SINCE MONDAY

Ann F. Woodward



Illustration by Ron Chironna

129

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 8/96

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On a perfectly normal October evening, when she was preparing a perfectly normal supper, Caroline Powell opened her spice cabinet and reached for a small brown bottle. Stew was in the oven, the table was set. Lawson was leaning back in his armchair with a glass of wine nearby on his right, penciling in the day's crossword puzzle and humming under his breath a tune quite unrelated to the song Nina Simone was singing on the tape he had running, but following the chord changes. In a few minutes, when she had finished the salad dressing she was making, Caroline would call him to the table and they would have their dinner in peaceful silence, with a few exchanges about people they'd met or events in the news that day. By that time Nina would have segued into Vivaldi, because that was the way Lawson set up his tapes—jazz for the pre-dinner time, then something from the eighteenth century. The tapes paced Caroline's activity in the kitchen, a matching of music to dinner service she was just beginning to realize.

The bottle in Caroline's hand, which had been right next to the steak sauce, was not the one she had meant to take. For one instant she was annoyed, then amused. In the next instant the

imminence of the change on the tape bloomed in her mind, and she thought, why not?

Lawson, of course, when it came time to tell Sheriff Wilkie Baines that Caroline was missing and about her recent irrationalities, knew nothing of this, of the inner moment when it all began. The sheriff, though, eventually understood it.

"You say she's been gone since Monday. That's two days now and you're just telling me about it?"

Lawson looked down, then put his hand over his eyes, hiding what it was he thought. "When a man's wife goes off . . . you don't always want people to know about it."

"I understand that. But what makes you so sure she's gone off?" Wilkie was silent for a moment, thinking of the possibilities for harm that sheriffs knew all too well, thinking of the Remsberg girl but not yet ready to mention her. "Don't you think if that were the case she would have left you a note or called you up?"

"Not if she's mad, she wouldn't. Things haven't seemed right with her lately, she's been acting funny. I remember it was that Monday night, two weeks ago. She stopped talking. I'd say some . . . just some ordinary thing, Is the trash ready to go

out? or It's time to get in the shower. And she'd stand still wherever she was and look at me and not answer. I don't know what it was, I don't know what I did."

Sheriff Baines, a large, controlled man whose close-fitting uniform was glossed and overlaid with the ornaments and accessories of his office—yellow embroidered county sheriff patch, holster belt, gun, silver badge—regarded him and waited. He was always slow to answer because he had found that the less he said, the more people were likely to tell him. He had a way also of hearing more than was actually said to him. Lawson Powell was a vice-president at the wire rope factory, a steady young man with springing brown hair and a stocky, well-muscled figure under his sport-shirt and cotton windbreaker. He was not a ready talker, and Wilkie waited, the attention making Lawson move restlessly in his chair.

"Sorry," the sheriff said, "I guess I'm doing what Caroline did, just looking and not saying anything. But you see, it wasn't necessarily something you did. Every person has . . ." He broke off and shifted his weight to lean back in the spring chair. In this job, he had found, a lot of time must be spent making obvious statements: "Yes, ma'am, I

know he's a good boy, but he smashed a man's store window because he wouldn't sell him beer and we got to make him understand what it is he's done here." Or, "If you keep on slamming around like that, with your hands cuffed behind you, you'll fall down and hurt yourself, but you sure aren't going to hurt me." Or it might be he'd say, as he had last month, "Yes, Mrs. Remsberg, it looks like your daughter did leave home without your permission, but if she was smart enough to get a full scholarship at State, maybe she was smart enough to take it and we ought to check and see if that's where she is, even though you told her she couldn't go down there." He didn't like to remember that particular statement. They had not found the girl, just a bus driver who had seen Cindy Remsberg throw two suitcases into the back seat of a sharp new green Camaro that stopped for her at the shopping center, then get in, slamming the door and swaying toward the window as the dark-haired driver, not clearly seen, burned rubber through the parking lot. Still, an obvious statement of simple facts seemed to Wilkie a good place to begin, clarifying the situation, making people understand what it was they themselves were saying, and often warding off

more extreme interpretations of whatever it was that had happened. The sheriff always had to keep in the back of his mind the possibility of violence, random or purposeful, but he looked for the positive and took the side of harmlessness when he could.

Taking a deep breath, he came out with one more of the specialties of the office. "... every person has lots of little facets of association." Putting it a different way each time seemed to freshen his mind. "Your wife, now. She sees all the clients she works for as a ... what does she call it?"

"Freelance decorator."

"... all these people from downstate who are fixing up their summer places. And you said she did some volunteer work at the hospital. And you have to acknowledge there's always the possibility of accident or ..." He very carefully did not say "crime," not yet. "What I mean is, don't take the blame onto yourself. Sometimes it comes to be that way with married people, they're so busy getting along with each other, they forget there's a whole town out there to be got along with, too—other family, work people, the man who thinks you nearly ran him off the road." She might have come to harm, he was thinking, but Lawson had not gone beyond blaming himself for

driving his wife away. Wilkie decided to let it stay that way.

He pulled a yellow lined pad onto the desk blotter and took up a pen.

"I want to make a list here of all the things you've noticed lately," he said, and printed deliberate letters at the top of a clean page. "Caroline Powell." Lawson recited, and the sheriff wrote.

COOKING—EVERYTHING
TASTED STRANGE

The sheriff looked up. "Make you sick?"

"No, just odd flavors, like something *wrong* with everything."

They went back to the list.

BREAKFAST—PUT ORANGE
JUICE ON CEREAL, DRANK MILK
CAR (BLACK BMW FOUR-
DOOR, 853 MJQ)—LEFT ON
STREET INSTEAD OF IN GARAGE,
"time and time again," he
wrote, quoting Lawson.

BREAKFAST AGAIN—SERVED
HAMBURGER AND ICE CREAM,
DINNER WAS WAFFLES AND BACON

STANDING—

"Standing?" said the sheriff.

"She'd stand in front of me when I'd ask her what was going on. You know, when I'd say why did you do that. And she'd close her eyes and raise her arms a little out from her sides and feel the air and turn back and forth, sort of swaying. She

“didn’t listen, she never answered me.” He shook his head and the frown came back. “I don’t understand any of it. It’s like—it’s like some terrible diseases you hear about, but Caroline’s only thirty-five, it couldn’t be that.”

He means Alzheimer’s, but he can’t say it, thought Sheriff Baines. Lawson’s expression was a mixture of hope of having found an explanation that relieved him of any blame and dread of what that explanation would mean. “She’s wandered off, we have to find her,” he said, his eyes intense.

“That’s what we’re hoping to do,” the sheriff said, and set his pen against the pad. They continued the list.

BED—MADE UP WITH THE
PILLOWS AT THE FOOT

CAR AGAIN—ALWAYS FILLING
THE GAS TANK, EVEN WHEN
DOWN JUST A LITTLE

CLIENTS—TROUBLE

“What was the nature of the trouble with the clients?”

“They had trouble with *her*, she wouldn’t meet them. Until finally this woman from Indiana just had a fit on the phone, and Caroline said she’d go out there. And she never came home from that appointment.”

They had finished the list, but Lawson still sat, as if there were more to be said. The sheriff waited. Lawson started to

speak, then stood. But before turning to the door, he burst out, “She has no right to leave me. I mean she has no complaint, I don’t drink or, you know, any of those things. I have my work, so I need a regular schedule, I thought she understood that. And why didn’t she ever say anything, why did she have to just close up like she did? If she was upset I would like to have known it, I’m supposed to care about that.” He turned full around and bent a little toward the sheriff. “When she had to have that operation and they said no kids, I thought she’d never stop crying. I did everything for her then, and I guess she thought I was good enough then and then she needed me. So how come this time, when she—well, I don’t know yet what it was, but she’s my wife, she should have talked to me.”

The sheriff nodded and waited again, but Lawson rubbed his face and asked if that was all. Sheriff Baines wrote down the address of the cottage of the woman from Indiana and the time of the appointment and said he’d get right on it.

Feeling an urgency, because of the Remsberg girl, that hadn’t yet occurred to Lawson, Wilkie nevertheless wanted to make his inquiries quietly. Wives sometimes left for a few days

and then came back. True, there had been no overt quarrel. Yet strenuous investigation would advertise whatever trouble Lawson and Caroline might be having, even though he said there had been none. The men were looking for her car, but so far there was no reason to think anything bad had happened. Wilkie stopped by the dispatch room to tell Max where he'd be, then drove out to the house of Mrs. Horton, who had had a fit on the phone to Caroline.

Cottage was the word Lawson had used, but actually it was what anyone would call an elaborate house, set among trees and overlooking the lake: steep gables with glass up to the peaks, balconies and terraces, and a fieldstone wall that was a huge chimney. Wilkie rang the bell, then walked all around the house in the yard and couldn't find anyone home. He wasn't surprised. Most of the summer people had left town by now. He was back in the sheriff's car and had just started the engine when Rusty Walker came up the long drive in his truck, hopped out with the energy of a small man, and leaned down into the car window.

"Lord, Wendell, don't tell me somebody's broke in." Though the sheriff's name was Wilkie, family name of his mother, some wag around town had taken to

calling him Wendell soon after he was elected sheriff, saying he couldn't remember which of those two well-known names was the sheriff's. Most of the local people still called him Wendell instead of Wilkie. Sheriff Baines tolerated it, understanding that it made them more comfortable with the authority of his office if they thought they could have a little joke with him.

"I'm supposed to be looking after this place," Rusty was saying, "and I sure hope there's not much damage. Damn kids get to helling around and—"

"Nothing like that, just riding by, routine check. I see the Hortons are not here."

Rusty relaxed and stood up, jamming his hands into his pockets. "They been here, though, this past weekend. Want to have the house redecorated, new whatever's, I don't know." His smile was tolerant and a little mystified. The money spent by summer people often left the locals bemused, not only by the amounts of it but by the high-flown requirements of the well-off. Pure space around them in the form of a large property on the water or two or three adjoining condominiums seemed to be a primary status mark, a value few of the people in town could relate to, though they understood the expensive

cars and big yachts. But yards and yards of custom-made draperies, wallpaper, handsome furniture and rugs, stereos and big TV's, swimming pools right beside the lake! All this was a change of concept from the muslin, wicker, bare board walls, sleeping porches, and camping-out air of the oldtime cottagers who had started coming by train a hundred years ago. The area was remote, not attractive to industry, and many people made a good living looking after property for the city owners, or sewing the draperies, upholstering the sofas, building, painting—so the general attitude toward them was tolerant. Rusty was caretaker for the Hortons' big house.

"Last weekend they came up. He flew back Sunday night, and she stayed over till Monday to see Caroline Powell, got kind of mad because Caroline wouldn't meet her on the weekend. Doing some painting and that, I guess, they were holding up little color chips, you know how they do. I had brought my Toro, and I was sweeping up the leaves. They finished before I did, and they both left. Mrs. Horton drives fast, and she was going to make Chicago in six hours, she said, spend a few days with her mother and then go home to Indianapolis."

"Caroline went on back to town, I guess."

Rusty screwed up his eyes and looked in the window. "What's going on, Wendell? Why you want to know what Caroline was doing?"

"Did I ask you what she was doing? I'm just making a remark to pass the time."

"Well, I don't know if Caroline went home, but she sure left here."

"I expect she keeps pretty busy, with all these new condominiums and people remodeling or building new houses out here in the woods."

"Yeah, she must be pretty good. I wouldn't know."

Wilkie sat and Rusty stood beside the car, both of them looking out to the lake, which was blue with reflected sky. The water, with its changes, was a presence in the life of the town, and they all loved it without ever saying so, contemplating it at times throughout every day, consulting it for the temper of the weather and almost of their own souls.

"Yeah," Rusty said again.

"I'll go along now. See you," said the sheriff, and he put the car in gear.

The tin voice of the radio came on and shut off in short, flat bursts. Mrs. Wankle out at Jefferson complained that her neighbor had deliberately run

over a new Norway spruce in a fight about a property line, and an officer was dispatched to investigate. A woman was stopped and brought in for DUI. Max in the radio room ran the three o'clock outside check to see where the patrol cars were.

Listening to all this, Wilkie drove to the hospital in town and stopped at the admitting desk. Jeannine Martinus was sitting at a computer behind the window of a cubicle, typing in the insurance card number of a young mother who rocked a sick baby in her arms. Three people waited in the line of chairs against the wall.

Jeannine saw him and nodded. "Hi, Wendell. You looking for me or some other bad dude?" An old man sitting in the line laughed and leaned forward in his eagerness to see the sheriff sassed, just catching himself from falling out of his chair.

Putting his off-holster side firmly against the paneling next to the window, Sheriff Baines crossed his arms and took up the position of the committed loungeur, an unmistakable attitude of aimlessness. He put out one hand to stroke the baby's hot forehead, smiled at the mother, and said with a sad shake of the head, "No, Jeannine, you're still getting away with it. I don't know why I don't

pull you in. It surely is a crime to be as pretty as you are."

Jeannine, her cheeks more ruddy than usual, put on a business face and said to the mother of the baby, "I'm going to send you right back to Dr. Waite now, the nurse is coming to show you the way," and then opened the door of the cubicle and invited Wilkie in.

Because she worked in a hospital, Jeannine was used to holding confidential news, and the sheriff knew he could trust her. He led her to a back corner of the little room and spoke quietly, telling her directly that he was looking for Caroline Powell, who was thought to have run off from Lawson. "Since she does some work here, I wondered if you had any ideas."

"Caroline is very faithful in coming, she helps back in the children's ward. You should talk to Dr. Westrum, but he's not here this week, had to go to Washington about a grant. I'll call Millie, she's the day nurse. She'll be busy for a while with that baby, but if you can wait?"

Wilkie was thinking. Vernon Westrum had lost his wife to cancer about a year ago, leaving him to raise two small children alone and keep up with his pediatric practice. Alice Mabry had taken over the house for him but she had recently moved. "How's he getting along,

now Alice's gone to Florida for her arthritis?"

"Don't ask. He found a girl from Allenton, but I'm not sure it's working out. Caroline didn't like her, I heard."

"Oh? Did Caroline have something to say about it?"

"Enough. Wilkie Baines, you think there's some connection, Caroline and Dr. Westrum both gone at the same time? I haven't said a word, get out of here before you land me in trouble." She moved back to her computer and telephone. "You want to talk to Millie?"

"No, I got to be going on," and he turned toward the door.

Not wanting to disappoint the old man in the waiting room, she called after Wilkie as he left, "Sorry not to be more lawabiding, sheriff, blame it on the Clairrol," and she touched her very blonde hair. He let her have the last word.

Driving around time was finished, the radio was saying there were people asking for him back at the sheriff's department. He went to the office and put the Powell problem in the back of his mind, only taking time during the afternoon to look up Dr. Westrum's address: out on Lakeside Road beyond the Horton house. Lawson called from his office at the plant, speaking quietly as if he held his hand around the receiver.

Wilkie told him he didn't have anything yet but he was working on it.

Actually, underneath the routine events of a Wednesday afternoon, he was beginning to form an idea of where Caroline might be and why she might be there. He kept the list of her oddities on his desk where he could see it, and he found a characteristic common to many of them. Caroline had done a lot of things backwards: orange juice on the cereal and milk in the glass; then reversing breakfast and dinner; making the bed head to foot; refusing business instead of meeting clients. Drawing in other things he knew—the car with a full tank of gas left on the street, her opinions about the doctor's babysitter—Wilkie thought Caroline had been planning to go somewhere.

Toward the end of the afternoon a girl who was Cindy Remsberg's friend was brought to the office by her father, who said she had something to tell them. The girl was hanging back and crying, and the father was anxious that he not be held responsible if something had happened to Cindy.

"Mrs. Remsberg wouldn't let her do anything," the girl said. "I mean, she wouldn't let her go anywhere, even down to the beach for a party after work."

She always wanted her at the restaurant, Cindy was just a slave," the girl said. Wilkie had heard that Anna Remsberg's husband had abandoned them when Cindy was a baby, and he knew the mother's independence and pride in her restaurant. "But Cindy is pretty," the girl went on, "she wants to have some fun. Like all of us, she wants to get away from here."

The father puffed up with exasperation. "I was not a party to this, and my wife wasn't either. We would never do a thing like this. And I'm sorry to come here so late, but we just found out that Cindy used our address when she applied for college scholarships."

"Do you think Cindy left here to go down to State?" Wilkie asked the girl.

She wiped her hands on her hips and glanced at her father. She was a healthy looking girl wearing hightop gym shoes with the fastenings open, tight jeans, and a sweatshirt several sizes too big for her. As answer she nodded.

"How was she going to get there?"

Leaning away from her father's barely contained fury, the girl mumbled an answer. When they couldn't understand her, the father raised his voice. "Tell him!"

"Hitchhike," was all she said.

"Do you know anyone who drives a green Camaro?"

Appearing dazed, the girl said, "No. And I'm sorry, I *had* to keep her secret. I didn't think she'd disappeared; I thought you just didn't know where to look for her, I thought she was down there going to classes and all." She started to cry again. "I wanted to go, too, but I didn't get in, all I can do is take courses out at Northern Pines." That was the name of the community college. More tearful than ever, she finished, "Or I would have been with her, we would have taken her—you would have taken her with us, wouldn't you?" to her father, and he nodded. "... All of us would have gone together in our car, and now she'd be all right."

The father vented an explosive burst of air, as if admitting that he would have driven Cindy Remsberg down to State if his own daughter had been smart enough to get in had somehow involved him in her disappearance. He stood, pulling the girl up by the elbow, and they left.

Wilkie went home, changed out of his uniform, had dinner, shot some baskets with his boys for a while. When they started to bed, he told his wife he had to go out. Taking Lakeside Road, he found the number he was looking for on a mailbox and

turned into a long driveway. At the end of it there was a simple house with a small black BMW parked in front. Caroline herself answered the door, straining her face into blankness when she saw him.

"No good, Caroline. I know who you are, and you know me," he said. She hung her head down and didn't answer. "I thought maybe you'd be here, just a hunch. Lawson's worried, and I'd like to talk to you."

With her head turned away so he couldn't see her expression, she stepped back and held the door open. "Kids in bed?" he said, and she nodded. She wore a man's shirt and pants, both too big for her, the pants legs rolled up, thick socks on her feet.

"I see you have to wear the doctor's clothes," he said.

She looked at him seriously. "This is not what you think. I haven't been carrying on with Vern Westrum, he didn't know I would do this."

"I know that. And you hadn't exactly planned to come out here when Vern left town, had you? But you knew you would. I understand that, Caroline. You weren't going to have those children left with a woman you didn't trust. She's a drinker, isn't she? We checked her out."

Justified, Caroline let all her indignation about the woman

and fright at the extreme action she'd taken show in her face. "I don't know how you knew," she said, and then she told him how she had come to be there. After the doctor's wife died and she saw how hard it was for him to do his work and take care of his family, she began to hate her own life, which seemed useless to her. "I see all these people thinking of their own pleasure—vacations, boats, drinking—and I help them to one luxury after another, I don't even try to hold them back from chintz at a hundred dollars a yard. I make a lot of money." She shrugged and looked at him.

"If you'd had children, you'd have thought that a fine way to get out of the house, do something of your own."

"That's it. Children. And working at the hospital just makes it worse. I can hold them and love them, but they aren't mine."

"Caroline, this didn't really have much to do with Lawson or the doctor, did it? It's just that you wanted to take care of the children, to do something good for them that Dr. Westrum couldn't ask you to do."

"I wonder what Lawson told you."

"He said you'd been acting strange. He thinks you're mad at him."

She laughed, sitting in her

oversized clothes on the end of the sofa, her brown hair loose around her face, looking younger than she was but tired. "And at the hospital they think I'm in Washington with Vern. What I've been doing would surprise them all." She looked around at the big living room, slipcovers askew, books on the floor beside the bookcase, a set of blocks scattered over the rug. "This is not easy, you know that?"

"I have two boys. But look here, Caroline, you have to let Lawson know. I don't want to be the one to do it."

"I reached for the steak sauce one night and picked up the vanilla by mistake. And all of a sudden everything seemed so predictable—the music on the tape would change, and I'd put supper on the table, and on and on. So I put the vanilla in the salad dressing, it wasn't good but it was different. And I had this feeling that I was a person separate from Lawson and could lead my own life, make some kind of meaning apart from him."

She got up and went to the kitchen part of the big room, motioning him to follow while she put on water to boil and set out mugs and a choice of instant coffees and herb teas. He took the spoon she handed him and mea-

sured out decaffeinated coffee for both of them.

"Caroline, I said before that you hadn't planned to come out here. That was obvious because you didn't bring any clothes for wearing with children, you would have been dressed up to meet Mrs. Horton, and now you're wearing Vern Westrum's shirt and pants. If you don't mind, I think I'll tell you what you did and you might understand it a little bit better. I don't know how you feel about Vern, but you wanted to throw out that girl from Allenton and take care of Vern's children yourself. That was not a thing you could consciously plan, it was a wrong thing, to your mind. So you practiced doing a lot of little wrong things—" He stopped, hoping she'd tell the rest of it. She was looking serious and interested. "You kept the car full of gas and ready out on the street. Then, when you finished at the Hortons', you couldn't help it, you turned right instead of left and drove out here. It was Monday, the doctor had just gotten on the plane, and you didn't want that woman in the house with the children at night."

"Do you know what it's like to be paralyzed?" she said. "My body got stiffer and stiffer until I felt I couldn't move." She looked into the dark mug she

held. "I couldn't move. I would stand and feel that there was a cage around me, I could feel it like a tube of glass. But then I began to think that what I felt was space around me, the space of an individual woman. I wasn't tied to Lawson, I was a free person, and any cage I might think I felt was something I had put there myself. So when he would start to close in with his routines and his expectations, it was only because I let him, or because I too expected those things of myself and was bound by them."

"And you became angry."

"Maybe. But it was a new idea, that I was a separate person. I had to try it out."

"And what do you tell yourself, now that you've tried it?"

"It's true that I'm free. And it's true that I'm bound—but only so much as I choose to be. And right now I'm not sure where I want to commit myself."

"You don't say much about Vern. What about when he comes back? I get the feeling this doesn't really have much to do with him."

"He called, he knows I'm here. He's upset because he doesn't know what it means, but I could tell he was relieved."

"Uh-huh. Well, Caroline, that's your business, and it's your right to help a friend. And while it seems to me it may have

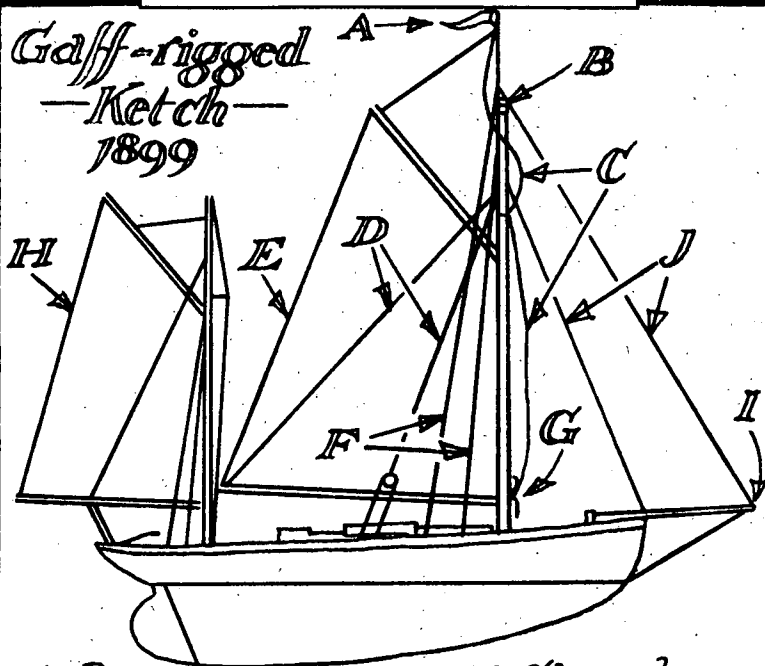
gone a little beyond that, I have nothing to say about it. Officially I don't even have to let Lawson know where you are, though I will tell him you haven't come to any harm. He's worried about a lot of things. But it's up to you to decide what to do."

He glanced across the room to where a telephone sat on a table near the door, then put down the mug and stood. "I've got to go. But I'd hate to have Lawson still calling me tomorrow." Looking down, he saw that she had hung her head and was hiding again, and he had no idea what she'd decide to do.

Outside the lake murmured in the darkness, and wind sifted through the pines. He stretched his legs out slowly as he walked to the car, shut off the radio for a few minutes of peace, and rubbed his face, which was feeling fuzzy with sleepiness. Here was Caroline, stirring things up but safe and whole at least. If only they could have found the Remsberg girl just as safely going to class at State, he thought, and switched the radio on again as he swung up the slope to the highway. Max—what was Max doing there at night?—was saying, "... two suitcases under the bridge over the Springlate River on County 612. All available officers report in, we'll need to make a search of the area. Boss, where the hell are you?" □

MYSTERY CLASSIC

*Gaff-rigged
—Ketch—
1899*



*A. Burgee
B. Mainmast
C. Burgee Hoist
D. Halyards
E. Mainsail*

*F. Shrouds
G. Cleat
H. Mizzen
I. Bowsprit
J. Forestays*

THE THIMBLE RIVER MURDER Josephine Bell

“Oh dear,” said Jill Wintringham at breakfast. “John Chudley seems to be involved in that affair at Thimble after all.”

Her husband handed her a letter he had just opened.

“He says so here. Exchange with me.”

Jill took the letter from his hand and gave him the newspaper. David read the paragraph she had seen. It was an account of the inquest on the body of an elderly man who for the last three years had been living on board a yacht in the River Thimble. His body had been found two days before in the cabin of his boat with injuries that suggested a deliberate attack. A sum of money had disappeared from the yacht. The account went on to say that death was caused by a fracture of the skull inflicted by an undiscovered weapon and accelerated by advanced heart disease. Verdict—murder by some person or persons unknown.

“Have we got the cutting of the earlier account?”

“Two. I’ll find them for you.”

Jill went away to her desk and came back with the newspaper cuttings.

“I kept them because John lives near there, so I was interested. I see he wants you to go down. Can you manage it?”

“As tomorrow is Saturday, I think I can take the morning off in a good cause without getting fired by my Area Board. I’ll go to John’s place tonight. You might wire him to say so.”

He put the cuttings away in his wallet, where they remained until the evening. Then, in the train going down to Southampton, he took them out again and read them carefully.

The victim of the murder, an elderly man named Harcourt, was an eccentric who lived all the year round on an ancient yacht which he kept moored on the River Thimble, some ten miles from Southampton. The mooring belonged to a small boat-building yard on the shores of the river, and Mr. Harcourt used their landing stage for his daily visit to the nearest public house ashore. Apart from his evening trip he went ashore so seldom, and spoke to so few people, that he was considered to be practically a recluse. He did, however, make something of an occasion of his shore-going once a month, when he set off in the morning with several large shopping bags and haversacks, returning in the afternoon with household stores. He always made these purchases at a neighboring small town,

where his gaunt, whitehaired person was well known. The shopping was always preceded by a visit to his bank, where he cashed a check each time large enough to cover all his expenses for the coming month. This fact was also widely known among those who came in contact with him.

Nothing unusual happened until the morning on which his dead body was discovered in the cabin of his yacht. On that morning an employee at the shipyard, called Goacher, coming to work at half-past seven, noticed the burgee flying at the head of Mr. Harcourt's mast. This immediately made him uneasy because he knew that the old man observed a rigid discipline on his boat, taking down his burgee at eight in the evening and putting it up again at eight the next morning. He drew his employer's attention to this when the latter arrived at the yard at eight o'clock. The boat builder rowed off to the mooring and found Mr. Harcourt. He immediately called the police.

It was clear at once that robbery was the motive for the crime. The old man's empty wallet lay on the floor of the cabin, and inquiries at the bank proved that he had cashed a check for sixty pounds there the day before. Of this sum a total of ten pounds had been spent at various food shops and on small bills, including one paid to the yacht builder himself for mooring fees. The balance, larger than most people would have suspected him of using, had disappeared.

All this David extracted with some difficulty from the newspaper accounts of the murder and the evidence given by witnesses at the inquest. The medical evidence was simple: it seemed likely that the old man had been taken unawares from behind or while lying on his bunk, and stunned by the first blow. Three blows appeared to have been dealt him, and his already diseased heart did the rest. No weapon was found on the yacht, nor had dredging in the vicinity brought one to light so far. The cabin did not show any definite signs of a struggle, though blankets and cushions were flung about. This suggested a search for hidden reserves of money or valuables rather than a display of resistance by the victim. The time of death was presumed to be the evening before the body was found, some time after six, when the shipyard was deserted, and before eight, when Mr. Harcourt would have taken down his burgee if he had been able to do so. The postmortem findings put the time anywhere between seven and twelve midnight, limits which David thought rather too wide. He determined to find out more about this later on.

John Chudley met him at Southampton with a car and drove him to his house above the Thimble, about a mile and a half from the shipyard involved in the murder. It was obviously no good going to see the spot that night, so David, after dining with his host, settled down to a pipe and encouraged him to talk by asking a question.

"How did you get mixed up in this at all?"

Chudley got his own pipe going before he answered the question. Then, puffing blue clouds at the ceiling, he said, "My boat happens to be moored next to his. I went aboard him that evening for a drink, round about six, but I didn't stay long. Actually I was going off to my own boat when he called me on board, and as I had things to do, I got away as soon as I could. His cabin was fairly untidy, with the new stores lying about and blankets out on the bunks."

"There was a suggestion at the inquest that he had been lying down when he was attacked."

"I know. Very likely he was. His heart had been none too good for some time, and these monthly expeditions to town took it out of him. As I say, I got off to my own boat after a brief chat and stayed there till just after seven. I couldn't stay longer than that on account of the tide."

"Why?"

"The landing stage at the boatyard is on the mud at low tide: you can't get anywhere near it from the water without wading ankle deep in mud. I just managed to push up close enough as it was."

"So anyone coming down after you left would not have been able to take a boat away from there?"

"No. Not until there was more water as the tide came in again."

"A couple of hours later?"

"At least that."

"But the burgee's being left up suggests he was killed before eight."

"Then it must have been after seven fifteen. I was near enough in my boat to have heard anyone going aboard his."

"I see." David paused before making his next remark. "Do you agree that the time is necessarily fixed by the evidence of the burgee?"

"Oh, the old boy had very definite habits. He might have forgotten to take it down, I suppose. The human element always keeps cropping up. But I would have said with him that you could bank on that."

Again David paused.

"So you were the last person to see him except the murderer, and according to you the last person who could have gone off to his boat from the landing stage opposite. I suppose that has made the complications for you?"

John Chudley nodded.

"Obviously. My housekeeper, of course, can testify that I was home by seven thirty and did not go out again that night, to the best of her knowledge. The truth of my statement is also suggested by the fact that there is a scrape on the old boy's topsides with green paint in it, and my ship's dinghy is the only green-painted one at this yard."

"Contact proved," said David with a smile, "but not time of contact. Did you, in fact, bump her when you went aboard?"

"I did not."

David raised his eyebrows. "So you think someone borrowed your dinghy to do the deed?"

"Possibly, though I can't see when. But I am quite sure there must be green paint somewhere else up or down the river."

"I suppose so."

David asked no more questions that night, but the next morning he made his way to the boatyard early and, after explaining to the owner who he was, persuaded him to take him off to the yacht.

"I don't know as I ought to do this," the man explained when they lay alongside, "only you're a friend of Mr. Chudley's. The police had a guard on her up to yesterday. Cabin's locked. You won't be able to see round there."

"I'll do the best I can on deck," said David, climbing up as he spoke.

The yacht was an old fashioned, gaff-rigged ketch. She had been stripped of most of her gear and had evidently not been to sea for a considerable time. David noticed that a couple of halyards still hung from her mast and were tied out to the shrouds to prevent their banging about and making a noise at night. His eye followed the thin hoist of the burgee from a cleat to which it was fastened at the foot of the mast up to the little flag flapping above the mast-head. He went carefully over the decks, finding nothing of interest until he came to the shrouds on the starboard side. There he checked, stooped, and with a little grunt of pleased surprise gathered from the wire a few thin strands, the frayings of a fine rope. After this he got back into the dinghy, where the boatyard owner had been sitting all this time watching him.

"You haven't looked at the paint in that scrape, sir," he said reproachfully. "The police set a good deal of store by that paint."

David looked as bidden.

"Do you agree that it came from Mr. Chudley's boat?" he asked.

The man was unwilling to answer at first. Then he said, "Might be. But his isn't the only green dinghy on the river."

"So he says himself." David looked him in the eyes. "Do you think Mr. Chudley did it?"

There was no answer.

"You don't want to. But you can't be sure he didn't. Any motive that you know of?"

The man made up his mind to talk. His words came with a rush. "I'd have said it was impossible, only Mr. Chudley is so dead set on sailing. He needed a lot of repairs this year, and I put them in hand for him. But I'm a small concern and I have to be paid for my material as I go along. Mr. Chudley couldn't manage the figure I gave him, so the work had to be suspended pro tem. Now the season's started and he's a bit disappointed-like. I don't say he'd go to those lengths, but you never quite know."

"Have you told the police that?"

"No. Let 'em do their own dirty work. Besides—"

He stopped, looking at David thoughtfully.

"Besides what?"

"There might be another alternative."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at this dinghy of mine. Grey paint, you see. But the last coat was green, as you can see where it's been knocked about. Here, for instance, and here."

"Well?"

"I'll take you back to the yard, and you can have a word with my lad, Goacher. The one that noticed the burgee first off. You speak to him, sir. Perhaps you can advise me after that."

Goacher was in the boatbuilder's shed, putting the first coat of paint on the bottom of a new small sloop. David went up to him and began, first of all, to admire the lines of the new boat.

"She'll be a nice job," agreed the young man shortly. He seemed disinclined to talk. But as David continued to praise his work he dropped his reserve and became enthusiastic in his turn. Very soon he was describing the sort of boat he meant to have for himself, and this seemed likely to continue indefinitely when he suddenly broke off with a muttered, "Castles in the air, I reckon."

"Oh, I shouldn't say that," said David easily. "You might win your football pools, or get left a legacy."

Goacher swung round on him.

"What do you know?" he asked quickly.

"What about?"

"I suppose you've heard what they're all saying?"

"Who are saying what? I am a friend of Mr. Chudley's. I came here last night to Mr. Chudley's house for the first time in about five years."

"You're this private detective they're speaking of?"

"Are they? Suppose you open up a bit."

"People are saying I done the poor old beggar in to get his money. Not the cash he had on board. I used to do a lot of odd jobs for him one way and another. Filled up his water tank, that sort of thing. He used to say as a bit of a joke, 'I'll remember you in my will, Tom.' I never took it serious. Now they're saying I did."

"Do they say *when* you are supposed to have done it? Mr. Chudley tells me the yard people went home at six and there was no one here when he tied up at seven fifteen."

"That's right. But I came back. Mr. Harcourt wanted his accumulator. It was being charged, and it wasn't ready earlier. I fetched it here and took it out to him at half-past seven. Just handed it to him and left."

"I see. Did you have any difficulty getting off, with the tide right down as it was at that time?"

The boy grinned.

"Our old dinghy'll push off anything if you know how to work her. You have to jump on board from one of the other boats if she's away down the mud. I never take much account of the tide myself."

"Or of the mud, I suppose?"

"Well, naturally you can't keep your boots clean if you have to step on the mud to shove off."

David found the owner of the yard walking moodily up and down outside the shed. He stopped when he saw the former.

"Young Goacher told me several things," said David cheerfully. "I expect you know them all already."

"About his legacy, and taking the accumulator out to the yacht?"

"That's it. Did he tell all that at the inquest?"

"Not about the legacy—which is a fact, by the way. He heard this morning. He mentioned that he had seen Mr. Harcourt alone at seven thirty or just after."

"Did he? Mr. Chudley seemed to think he was the last to do so."

"Then he must have left the inquest early. Calling it to mind, I believe he did." He looked at David gloomily. "The police took both their fingerprints."

"Goacher's and Chudley's?"

"Aye. They'll find plenty of both on Mr. Harcourt's boat."

"No doubt. I wouldn't be too despondent if I were you. You see, I noticed something very interesting when I was on board just now."

"You didn't show it."

"No. It needs working out. But if I'm right, it puts your boy and my friend in a much healthier position."

"I hope to God you are right, then," the boatbuilder answered.

David next made his way into the neighboring town to visit the bank where Mr. Harcourt had kept his account. After a few words of explanation to the manager he was allowed to see Denton, the cashier who had served Mr. Harcourt on the day he was killed.

"Denton is not allowed to tell you anything about Mr. Harcourt's account," said the manager as he moved away to leave them together. "In fact, he will have very little to tell you, I'm afraid."

When he had shut the door, David turned to the cashier.

"How many of you are there working here?"

"Just the manager and one other clerk and myself. And one stenographer."

"I see. Now tell me about Mr. Harcourt's visit."

Denton drew his hands together on the desk in front of him.

"The old gentleman came in according to his usual habit at one o'clock precisely. I was on duty. I generally take the one to two break while the manager is out to his lunch. I go off from twelve to one. The other chap and the young lady also go from one to two. We do practically no business during that hour."

"Are you quite alone in the bank at that time?"

"The porter is back. He has twelve to one, like me. He polishes up brass during my hour alone: he's handy anyway."

"So Mr. Harcourt cashed his check at that time. Was he the only customer in the bank?"

"Yes. He was in very good form; we had our usual little chat about sailing."

"Ah!" said David. "You are one of the breed, are you?"

"I'm very keen, yes. I have a Firefly."

"Where do you keep her?"

"At Thimble. That's about two miles from where Mr. Harcourt's yard is."

"I know. Two miles downstream, isn't it?"

"That's right."

"I'd like to see your boat," said David.

Denton looked surprised, but he answered readily enough, "I'd like to show you."

They agreed to meet at Thimble on the riverside at six that evening.

Denton's boat was a smart little craft painted bright red with chromium fittings and an aluminum mast. She lay at a mooring not far from the shore among a good many other boats of her type. David was rowed out to her, and the two men got on board.

"I'd like to take you for a sail and show you what she can do," Denton said. "But the tide's still running down for three hours or more and there doesn't seem to be much wind, and what there is will probably drop in the next hour or so."

"Couldn't we go upstream and float back?" David suggested.

"We shouldn't make it. There'd be a headwind most of the way, same as it's been for the last fortnight. You can't beat against a foul tide in this river."

"Pity," said David. "Another time, perhaps."

He touched the neatly stowed halyards, all grouped round the aluminum mast, and turned away.

"I've enjoyed seeing her," he said politely.

Denton put him on shore, whence he made his way back to Chudley's house. After dinner he got his friend to take him to the police station, where he found the superintendent in charge of the case. This officer treated him with reserve but some respect.

"We checked your credentials, sir, with Scotland Yard, as you suggested. Superintendent Mitchell said you were okay."

"Very decent of him," David answered. "Actually I'm only here to help Mr. Chudley, who didn't very much like your last interview with him."

"We are looking for a motive," said the superintendent.

"That is always a good idea. Mr. Chudley and the boy Goacher both have motives, haven't they? So, perhaps, has Mr. Denton, the bank cashier."

"Has he?"

"I'm not sure. He could have. I can't prove it, but you could."

"I doubt it," said the superintendent. "He lives very quietly, he's a bachelor, he pays all his bills, his only hobby is sailing."

"He wants an all-aluminum racing dinghy," said David.

The other laughed.

"They all want more than they can afford in the way of boats. All sailing maniacs do. It isn't often serious."

"In the case of these three it was serious enough to drive one of them to murder. Unless," he added carelessly, "an unknown assassin came downriver on the tide, killed, passed on, and went home again on the flood."

"You've worked out the points about the ebb, I see," said the superintendent thoughtfully.

"I have. But according to my theory they don't matter."

"Oh! And what, may I ask, is your theory?"

"The evidence for it is rather slender," said David, producing a few frayed wisps of rope from his wallet. "These came off Mr. Harcourt's boat. Identify them and I think they will lead you to a new idea."

He described his visit to the yacht that morning.

"I see what you mean," said the superintendent. "But I don't see how we can make anything out of it."

"I do," said David. "Get those three men out to the yacht one by one tomorrow morning. Tell them to write down anything strange they see on her deck or topsides. I'll witness their signatures on their statements before they go ashore, and you can take the papers from them as they land. I think you'll get the answer."

"It isn't according to regulations," grumbled the superintendent, "but they told me you weren't exactly orthodox."

"Shortcuts never are," said David. "I don't like them in my own work, another kind of research. Never use them."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the other.

The next day Chudley, Goacher, and Denton visited the yacht in turn, rowed out there by a police sergeant in uniform whose handling of the oars betrayed his own favorite pastime.

"You're in the racket, too, aren't you?" David asked while the last of the three was looking round.

"Yes, sir. Part share, converted M.T.B."

"What do you use her for?"

"Fishing mostly."

David followed to the police station and on arriving found Chudley and Goacher sitting together in the charge room.

"Where is Denton?" he asked.

"In the superintendent's office. He said would you please go in, sir. This way, sir."

Denton, white-faced and cringing, swung round as he entered. David looked at him sadly.

"You didn't take enough trouble," he said. "It was quite a good idea to put up the burgee again after you'd killed Harcourt. It muddled the time. It made it seem impossible for anyone from your part of the river to come up and do it before sundown. You were helped by the fact that Mr. Chudley and Goacher both visited the yacht between six and eight, when you were known to have been playing around in your Firefly down at Thimble. Also, your boat is red, and by using Mr. Chudley's green dinghy to bump the yacht's side, you again suggested local effort. Going off, as you did, sometime in the night, you had enough water to use the landing stage and keep your clothes clean. But you ought to have known Mr. Harcourt better. You ought to have got to know his yacht better before you tampered with her."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Denton spluttered.

"Read him the other two comments," said David.

The superintendent took up two pieces of paper from his desk.

"Mr. Chudley and Mr. Goacher both state the same thing," he began. "They say the burgee hoist is at present fastened to a cleat at the foot of the mast, whereas Mr. Harcourt always fastened it to the shrouds on the starboard side. He had a thing about halyards flapping. He tied everything out away from the mast."

"That was what I noticed," said David, "and moreover I found some frayed bits of rope on the shrouds. They tally with the hoist, don't they, superintendent?"

"That's so."

"Just because you make fast your own burgee hoist to a cleat on your mast is no reason you should do so on another boat. Every man has his own way of fixing things. You ought to have remembered that and gone to look first. After all, you knew it would be dark when the tide was up enough for you to go off, unsuspected, to kill the defenseless old man in his sleep."

"I didn't," said Denton breathlessly. "That's all pure imagination. It's no proof at all. Why should I? I only saw him once a month."

What did I know of his affairs? What should I do it for, anyway? I had no motive, I tell you."

"I'm afraid you had," said David.

He looked at the superintendent, who nodded to him to go on.

"When I was at the bank, your manager told you not to divulge to me the state of Mr. Harcourt's account. That showed me that you knew it, or could get at it; otherwise he would not have warned you. Your own story of your times of work showed me that for an hour every day you had the bank to yourself. You *could* have indulged in embezzling if you had wanted to."

"And you did," said the superintendent. "Your manager has gone into the accounts very carefully for some weeks because he thought there was something wrong. You were too late with that fifty from Mr. Harcourt. Your manager had already found the leak, and he was expecting you to do something about it, though he naturally never thought of murder. He came to us the morning Mr. Harcourt's body was found, before the news was properly out. We had you in mind from the start, but there was nothing to go on until Dr. Wintringham gave that lead over the burgee."

Denton was too stunned to answer. He was charged with the murder and removed. The superintendent said, "You'd never think a sailing man would do such a thing."

"He sailed for show," said David. "Haven't you seen his boat? Vulgar little piece, she is. It was all self-display. Aluminum is pretty expensive. He wanted an all-aluminum boat, latest design." He paused and then said, "Does Goacher really get a legacy?"

"I believe so."

"I'm glad of that," said David. "He'll build his dream boat with it."

"And take her out to sea and drown himself."

They both laughed.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



A *Killing in Quail County* is a nostalgic first novel by Jameson Cole (St. Martin's, \$22.95) that isn't a mystery in any conventional sense. Never mind. The author's story of the people and events in the summer of 1957 in a small rural community in Oklahoma does have its share of crime, suspense, and even violence, but it's the fifteen-year-old narrator's voice, that of a boy on the brink of manhood, that makes this novel such a joy. Mark Stoddard lives with his older brother, the deputy sheriff, who's moved back home after their parents' fatal car crash. Add a murderer, a search for an illegal still, and a tomboyish summer houseguest at a neighbor's place, and you have the makings of an irresistible tale reminiscent of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* in its evocation of a place and time that now exist only in memory.

George Herman's *The Tears of the Madonna* (Carroll & Graf, \$22.95) continues what must be one of the most unusual series in the historical mystery genre. The time is 1499; the place is Italy; the sleuths are none other than Leonardo da Vinci and his friend Niccolo, a handsome and canny young dwarf. Certainly Herman's choice of period gives him ample opportunity for court murders, political intrigue, theft, poisonings, cuckolding, secret passages, deadly alliances, castle sieges, and the like. Spanning a period of eight months and employing a huge cast of characters, Herman paints his story on a wall-size canvas, illustrating it with numerous historical figures and incidents. The charm of this series, how-

ever, comes from the protagonists, their wits and their wit, and the nose for sleuthing they obviously share.

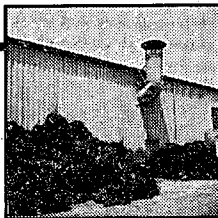
Carole Berry's former temp and tapdancing amateur sleuth, Bonnie Indermill, returns in **The Death of a Dancing Fool** (St. Martin's, \$21.95). Our Bonnie has almost settled down: she's moved in with her fiancé and his son in their home in the suburbs, and she's been enjoying a life of leisure. When an old friend and troublemaker asks her to help in his new Manhattan dance club, she stoutly refuses. But that's before the cops talk her into going undercover for them. The Manhattan settings and Bonnie's sense of humor still shine, and longtime fans may have a few reservations about Bonnie's future as a Long Island housewife.

Sharyn McCrumb continues her Appalachian series in **The Rosewood Casket** (Dutton, \$23.95). Old Man Stargill lies comatose in a hospital, which has occasioned the return of his four adult sons. All but one of the "boys" has moved away and made a life elsewhere; only Clayt, the youngest, has remained in the area, making his living at odd jobs and spending his free time as a student naturalist and historian. Stargill's collapse also brings old Nora Bonesteel down from her mountain home carrying a hand-carved box she's been holding in trust for the elder Stargill for a long, long time. Its contents draw Sheriff Spencer Arrowood into the story, but it will be the loathed task of serving an eviction notice on an old family that triggers the violence. McCrumb interweaves the present-day story with facts and lore about Daniel Boone and the early settlers, and the Indians before them. Together they paint a vivid portrait of the hardships endured by Kentucky's small dirt farmers for generations.

Charles Mathes's attractive heroine in *The Girl with the Phony Name* (1992) stars again in **The Girl Who Remembered Snow** (St. Martin's, \$22.95). Emma Passant is a professional (but marginally successful) magician. The recent death of her beloved grandfather at the hands of a mugger leaves her alone in the world, with both money and the determination to learn more about the secrets in his past and the questions surrounding her own birth. Mathes's quirky characters and strong writing raise this above the level of a gothic. I look forward to Emma's next return to the stage.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo Don Porter of Honolulu, go to Dixon Walmsley of John F. Besnard of Irvine, Miami, Florida; Andrew W. Brunswick, Canada; Paul vania; Austin Peterson of Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and Barry Baldwin of Calgary, Alberta, Canada.



tograph contest was won by Hawaii. Honorable mentions London, Ontario, Canada; California; Jean Mallicote of Paterson of Saint John, New Ryan of Lansdale, Pennsylvania; Evanston, Wyoming; J. F.

CLOSE BUT NO CIGAR by Don Porter

"Good morning, senator, won't you come right in?"

"What the devil is this? Are they renovating the Capitol again? Am I going to another damn costume party in a toga?"

"Not this time, senator. These are the Pearly Gates, and I'm St. Peter. You'll find your new robe comfortable when you get used to it."

"So this is heaven, eh? It'll be nice to get away from those damn Democrats. Be a good lad and fetch me a cigar."

"All in good time, senator. This is the vestibule; there are a few formalities."

"Like the Cloak Room, eh? Okay, just tell me what to vote for. Is that book a new tax code?"

"No, sir, this is the Book of Life. I see here that you helped a little old lady across the street in 1937 . . . that's it on the good side."

"Yeah, the damned old broad was on her way to vote."

"Well, that seems to outweigh the bad side. Apparently you never did anything at all."

"Of course not, I've been in the Yew-nited States Senate for fifty years. Now do I get that cigar?"

"Well, there's one more thing, senator. Each time a person tells a lie, the heavenly forge adds a link to their chain. Just pick up your chain and slip it around your neck, then go up those stairs. You'll find a tray of the best Havanas at the top. Your chain is behind the foundry just to the left of the smokestack."

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

(continued from page 4)

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR OF 1995:

***Penance* by David Housewright (Foul Play/Countryman Press)**

***Tight Shot* by Kevin Allman (St. Martin's)**

***Murder in Scorpio* by Martha C. Lawrence (St. Martin's)**

***The Harry Chronicles* by Allan Pedrazas (St. Martin's)**

***Fixed in His Folly* by David J. Walker (St. Martin's)**

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL OF 1995:

***Tarnished Blue* by William Heffernan (Onyx)**

***Deal Breaker* by Harlan Coben (Dell)**

***High Desert Malice* by Kirk Mitchell (Avon)**

***Charged with Guilt* by Gloria White (Dell)**

***Hard Frost* by R. D. Wingfield (Bantam)**

BEST SHORT STORY OF 1995:

"The Judge's Boy" by Jean B. Cooper (EQMM, August)

"Rule of Law" by K. K. Beck (Malice Domestic, Pocket)

"Death in a Small Town" by Larry Beinhart (New Mystery, Spring)

"When Your Breath Freezes" by Kathleen Dougherty (EQMM, September)

"A Plain and Honest Death" by Bill Pomidor (EQMM, September)

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY NOVEL OF 1995:

***Prophecy Rock* by Rob MacGregor (Simon & Schuster)**

***Spying on Miss Muller* by Eve Bunting (Clarion Books)**

***In the Middle of the Night* by Robert Cormier (Delacorte)**

***Angel's Gate* by Gary Crew (Simon & Schuster)**

***Spirit Seeker* by Joan Lowery Nixon (Delacorte)**

BEST JUVENILE MYSTERY

OF 1995:

***Looking for Jamie Bridger* by Nancy Springer (Dial)**

***The 13th Floor* by Sid Fleischman (Greenwillow)**

***Running Out of Time* by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Simon & Schuster)**

***Marvelous Marvin and the Pioneer Ghost* by Bonnie Pryor (Morrow)**

***The Bones in the Cliff* by James Stevenson (Greenwillow)**

BEST FACT CRIME OF 1995:

***Circumstantial Evidence* by Pete Earley (Bantam)**

***Mindhunter* by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker (Scribner)**

***Born to Kill* by T.J. English (Morrow)**

***Unfinished Murder* by James Neff (Pocket)**

***By Two and Two* by Jim Schutze (Morrow)**

**BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL
STUDY OF 1995:**

***Savage Art* by Robert Polito (Knopf)**

John Dickson Carr: The Man Who Explained Miracles by Douglas G. Greene (Otto Penzler)

The Life of Graham Greene, Volume II: 1939-1955 by Norman Sherry (Viking)

The Cadfael Companion: The World of Brother Cadfael by Robin Whiteman (Mysterious)

BEST MOTION PICTURE OF 1995:

***The Usual Suspects*, written by Christopher McQuarrie (Gramercy Pictures, PolyGram, Bad Hat Harry/Blue Parrot)**

Get Shorty, written by Scott Frank (Jersey Films/MGM)

Devil in a Blue Dress, written by Carl Franklin (Clinica Estetico, Muddy Lane Entertainment/TriStar)

Dolores Claiborne, written by Tony Gilroy (Columbia/Castle Rock)

To Die For, written by Buck Henry (Columbia)

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OR MINISERIES OF 1995:

***Citizen X*, written by Chris Gerolmo (HBO)**

Sugartime, written by Martyn Burke (HBO)

Shadow of a Doubt, written by

Brian Dennehy and Bill Phillips (NBC)

Indictment: The McMartin Trial, written by Abby Mann and Myra Mann (HBO)

A Dark Adapted Eye, written by Sandy Welch (*Mystery!*/PBS)

BEST EPISODE IN A TELEVISION SERIES OF 1995:

"Torah! Torah! Torah!," *NYPD Blue*, written by Theresa Rebeck (20th Century-Fox/ABC)

"The Lost Child," *Prime Suspect*, written by Paul Billing (PBS)

"The Eligible Bachelor," *Sherlock Holmes*, written by T. R. Bowen (*Mystery!*/PBS)

"Humbug," *The X-Files*, written by Darin Morgan (Fox)

"Rumpole and the Family Pride," *Rumpole*, written by John Mortimer (*Mystery!*/PBS)

The Ellery Queen Award went to Jacques Barzun; a special Raven was awarded to The Library of America for its publication of the collected works of Raymond Chandler.

Congratulations to all—especially, of course, to James Sarafin and also to AHMM author Bill Pomidor for his nomination and to Nancy Springer, a new AHMM author whose first story for us will appear in the September issue.

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AH August '96

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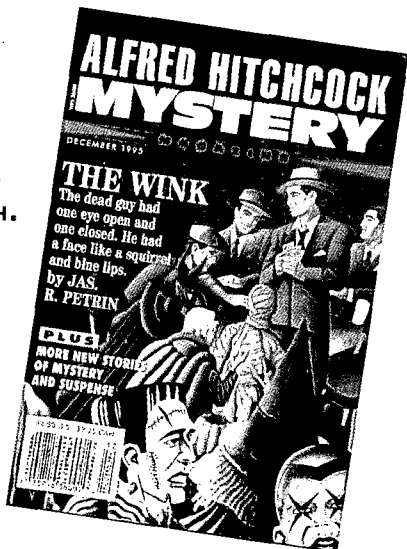
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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE



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